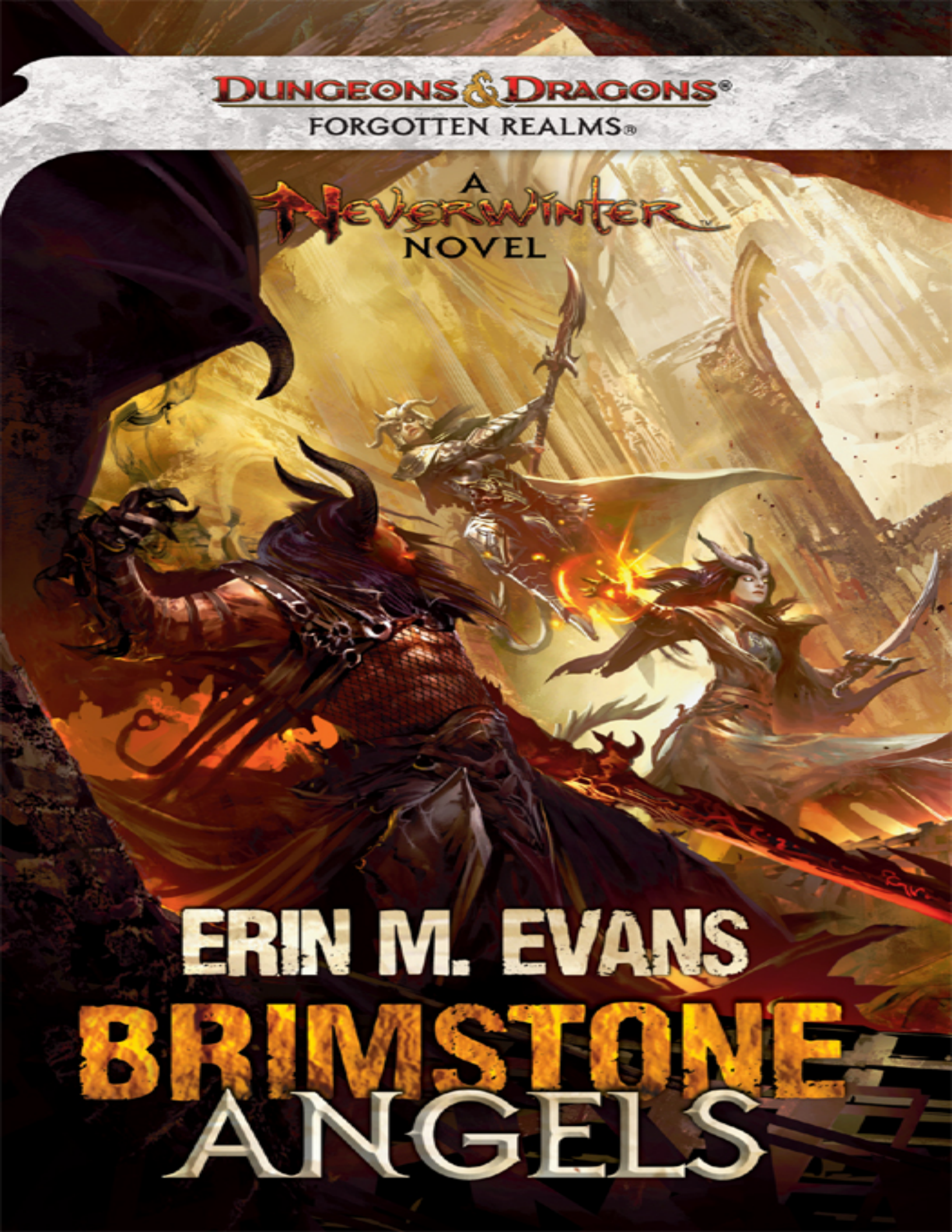
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

A NEVERWINTER™ NOVEL



ERIN M. EVANS

BRIMSTONE ANGELS

THE PACT

"I can help you, you know," Lorcan's crooning voice slid through her worries. "Simple as it comes. No one will ever hurt you …"

"No," Farideh said, though her thoughts felt slippery and loose. She covered her eyes and ducked her head. "No. Go away." Stay, she thought. Tell me.

"It's a simple thing," he said again. Lorcan set his hand, hot as an iron, on the bare spot between her shoulder blades, his fingers sliding just under the edge of her collar. "Not like what they tell you. Just say you're mine. That's all it takes …"

"No," she said, though her voice was growing fainter and her head was spinning. Why would she say no? She would be safe …

"Free. Free to do as you please. Free to find whatever life you want." He pulled her close, very close … His breath burned against her skin. "You want that, don't you?"

"Yes …"

"You want to be mine?"

"Yes," she said, and with that her thoughts seemed to clear: *He's out of the circle*.

Farideh looked up in horror at the cambion, whose arms held her like an iron band. "No!" she cried.

"Too late, darling." He whispered in her ear, "It wouldn't have held the imp either."

Then everything caught fire.



ALSO BY ERIN M. EVANS

Ed Greenwood Presents Waterdeep:
The God Catcher

FORGOTTEN REALMS

BRIMSTONE ANGELS

NEVERWINTER™

ERIN M. EVANS



BRIMSTONE ANGELS

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v3.1

DEDICATION

For my sisters; and for Kevin, who saved me (and this book) at least twice.

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Epilogue

Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.



A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE


Neverwinter
River District
Blacklake District
Protector's Enclave
1. Hall of Justice
2. House of Knowledge
3. Claven's General Supplies and Armory
4. Hallowed Temple of Selûne
5. Moonstone Mask
6. The Wall
7. Neverdeath, Main Graveyard
8. Neverdeath, Pauper's Section
9. Tarmalune Trade House
10. Driftwood Tavern
11. Beached Leviathan
12. Blacklake
13. Fisher's Float
14. Pirate's Skyhold
15. Vellgard Manor
16. House of a Thousand Faces
17. The Fallen Tower
18. Shard of Night
19. Cloak Tower
20. The Chasm
21. Upland Rise
N

PROLOGUE

THE VILLAGE OF ARUSH VAYEM,
THE TYMANTHERAN FRONTIER
21 NIGHTAL, THE YEAR OF THE PURLOINED STATUE (1477 DR)

FARIDEH MET THE DEVIL IN THE DEAD OF WINTER, SEVENTEEN YEARS after she'd been left at the gates of a village on no one's map. It was the winter after she'd drunk too much whiskey for the first time, and four winters after she'd had her first heartbreak, infatuated with the dairyman's much older son. Seven winters had passed since she'd first managed to swing a sword without dropping it.

And ten winters had blown through the village of Arush Vayem since she'd first realized that all of these things were bound to be heavy with other implications—all because she was a tiefling.

Farideh hugged the book she carried to her chest to make an extra layer against the frigid breeze that blew through her cloak and her clothes beneath. Her tail was nearly numb with the chill as she made long tiptoed steps to keep the drifting snow from crumbling into her boots, her eyes on the ground to keep her balance.

As she passed the well, she looked up from her feet, and her chest squeezed tight.

Not ten steps before her another tiefling, Criella, the village midwife and a priestess of the earth goddess, trudged up the same path. Bundled against the cold, Criella's sawn-off horns were hidden and her brick red skin ruddier than usual. Suddenly conscious of her own unaltered horns, curling back from her face and uncovered, Farideh smiled nervously.

"Well met, Mistress Criella," Farideh said, "and good morning."

“Well met,” Criella said. Her smile hovered at the corners of her mouth, but her eyes were hard. She stopped in the middle of the path. “Where are you heading?”

“Home,” Farideh answered.

“Hm. Where did you get that book?”

Farideh made herself keep smiling, as if she couldn’t hear Criella’s implication that she ought not to have the book in the first place. “From Garago,” she said, naming the wizard whose book it was. “He lends books to Havilar and me sometimes.”

“Havilar and *I*, dear.” Farideh bit her tongue as Criella continued. “And where is your sister?”

“Inside, probably,” Farideh said. Criella pursed her lips, and the younger tiefling quickly added, “I haven’t seen her in some hours. She’s likely with Mehen.”

“Does Mehen know you’re borrowing magic books?” Criella asked.

Farideh turned it over and opened it to show the frontispiece. “It’s just a history book.”

“*The Legacy of the Skyfire Emirates in the Calim?*” Criella said. “What has you so interested in *there* of all places?”

Far, far to the west, other tieflings sometimes joined the fiery efreets in the Calim Desert in their perpetual war against their enemies, the djinns of the air. Criella didn’t have to say another word—Farideh knew what she was implying: Why was Farideh reading a book about rogue tieflings who aided monsters and known slavers? Didn’t Farideh understand that she—just like everyone else descended from devils and fiends—had to know her place, to stay safe somewhere like Arush Vayem, to be quiet and unnoticeable?

Or did Farideh *want* to be the sort of tiefling who made life hard for the rest of them?

“Mehen was talking about the wars there.” Mehen, a dragonborn and a soldier in his life before Arush Vayem, had been the guardian of Farideh and her twin sister, Havilar, since they were abandoned at the village gates. More than a few of Havilar and Farideh’s

childhood bedtime stories had been sweeping, gory tales of battle. If he hadn't talked about the Calim, it was the merest coincidence.

"Was he?" Criella said.

"He mentioned them," Farideh amended. "It seems like such a silly thing, don't you think? For so many hostilities to range around something as unchangeable as one's nature?"

Criella's smile vanished altogether. "Ah. Is that something else Mehen has taught you?"

Farideh flushed. "That … the djinn shall always be djinn?" she said as innocently as she could, but her pulse raced. It had been too near to admitting there was something like fear lurking in herself. That the lines of descent that linked her to some long ago and faraway fiend were more powerful than anything she could affect. "I believe that's why they're called elemental," Farideh added.

"Of course," Criella said, but already she was studying Farideh as if there might be some sign of her true nature unfolding. Farideh blushed harder. Any of the human villagers would find Criella's scrutiny too subtle to notice. But Farideh's eyes were like Criella's—she knew the shifts and flickers of a tiefling's eyes. Criella wasn't trying to hide her disquiet.

Farideh longed to tell Criella that she knew. That she hated it. That it was worse coming from someone like Criella, who was a tiefling too. Who had gotten the same scrutiny from someone else when she was Farideh's age. Who had cut off her horns and clubbed her tail because of those looks and run away to Arush Vayem, a community of tieflings, dragonborn, and anyone else who wanted to disappear.

A prison and a refuge, Farideh thought. The wall around the village—the wall that kept out the monsters of the mountains, raiders and scouts, the hordes of people who hated Criella and the others enough to drive them to a place like Arush Vayem—might as well have been a circle of armed warriors, half their weapons pointed inward.

"Blood is a powerful thing," Criella said, her eyes burning into Farideh, "though it is always within our power to circumvent it. If we are vigilant."

“Criella.” The gruff voice behind Farideh made her jump. Criella looked up, and her surprise at seeing Mehen standing there was as plain as her contempt for his foster daughter. He might have weighed as much as a small ox, but Mehen could move with a silence not even Farideh could predict. She shifted out of his way.

Mehen stood a full foot taller than the already tall and gangly tiefling girl, his scales a dull ocher over hard muscle, and the frill along his jaw full of holes where he once wore the jade plugs that had marked his clan. Those rested now in a small enameled box Mehen kept in his room. He did not discuss them with Farideh or Havilar.

“Well met,” Criella said. “Farideh was just telling me about her interest in the Skyfire Emirates.”

“Is that right,” he said. He looked down his snout at Farideh. The way Mehen looked at Farideh made her suspect he never quite knew what to do with her. She was not like Havilar, who would have polled her own horns like Criella had it meant she could be a warrior of Mehen’s skill.

But even if she was not his favorite, Mehen would surely not take Criella’s side.

“It’s a *history* book,” Farideh said again. She knew Mehen’s expressions too—well enough to spot the shift of a scaly ridge that registered his annoyance at Criella.

“Good,” he said. “The genasi’s tactics are blunt, but it’s good to know your enemy.” He smiled at Criella, and she drew back at the row of sharp, yellowed teeth. “Run along,” he said to Farideh, “and get inside. You’ll freeze to death in this weather.”

“Yes,” Criella added. “I was about to say the same.”

Farideh bobbed her head meekly over the edge of the book.

She wanted to tell Criella, “I know you’re thinking I’d be lucky to freeze. I know you’re thinking my blood runs hot as the Ninth Layer of the Hells and we’ll all find that out soon enough. I know you’re thinking that with twins, one of us is bound to turn out rotten, and your coin’s been set on me.”

“Good morning, then, Mistress Criella,” was what she did say.

She had no more than rounded the corner before Mehen and Criella started talking again. “You had best set them to a profession,” Criella said. “They’re too old to be running wild.”

“They’re young enough,” Mehen said. “And I’m training them fine. We need defenders.”

“That girl is going to be no one’s defender and you know it,” Criella said. “Everyone knows it. Better to put up scarecrows than to send her on patrol.”

“No one was hurt.” But Farideh heard the embarrassed tone in Mehen’s voice. Havi could be sent on patrol, but not Farideh. Not so long as she jumped at martens and couldn’t keep hold of her sword.

“She’s a bright girl,” Criella said, “but she has a smart mouth and she’s too clever by half. Give her to me. I need an apprentice, and a few years of devotion to Chauntea should wear her …”

Farideh hurried down the lane, her face hot despite the cold wind. She didn’t need to hear the rest of Criella’s offer—the priestess had hinted at it often enough to Farideh—and she couldn’t bear to hear Mehen’s reply. Determined as Mehen was to keep her home and training, Farideh wasn’t sure which fate was worse.

But she would have to choose. There wasn’t much else open to her within the village’s walls, and Farideh knew better than to dream of a future she couldn’t have.

Farideh picked her way up to the ancient stone barn that had been converted, long before she’d been born, into a house for the dragonborn veteran and, later, his foundling daughters. By the time she stomped the snow off of her boots, she had forgiven Mehen, as she always did, but Criella knew just how to get under her skin.

She wasn’t the kind of tiefling Criella thought she was. She started to unwind the scarf from her neck and looked up into the room. Maybe Criella was right. Maybe she ought to keep her head down and stay here, so that people didn’t think …

The flutter of her thoughts ceased.

Her twin sister, Havilar, sat on the floor, her long legs stretched out in front of her, resting back on her arms. She was looking up at something standing in front of her.

No. Not something, Some*one*.

The devil was standing—waiting—in a circle of chalk runes that Havilar had drawn on the ancient oak planks of the floor. If Farideh looked at the runes, she would have known their names, but she could only look at *him*.

Someone else might have said he looked like an archdevil out of one of Garago's books. He did—red-skinned, cinder-haired and black-eyed, handsome as a young lord, with shapely horns and a pair of veiny wings that nearly scraped the ceiling of the loft he stood below. He was slim and well-muscled and clothed in snug leather, with rings on every finger and charms pinned wherever they could find a place.

But to Farideh, he looked like sin. He looked like want. He looked like all the thoughts she couldn't let herself have, bundled up in a skin and watching her drip snowmelt on the floor.

Handsome was a paltry word for him. Tiefling, human, or anything else—boys didn't look like this. Boys didn't make her feel as if someone were pulling seams loose inside her. He smiled, and his teeth were so like hers—even but for the sharp points of his canines that were too large by human standards, and pitiable by dragonborn. She had never thought so looking at her own teeth, but the devil's looked like a wolf's. Like something ready to take a bite of her.

The book slid out of Farideh's hands.

Havilar nearly jumped out of her skin when it hit the floor. When she turned and saw Farideh, she clasped a hand to her chest and let out a sigh. "*Karshoj*, you scared me."

"Oh Havi," Farideh breathed. "What have you done?"

A grin split Havilar's face—a face that was in almost every respect identical to Farideh's, save two: First, where Havilar's eyes were both golden, Farideh's right was silver and always had been. Second, Havilar was much more likely to be grinning. People called her "the cheerful one," and sometimes "the wild one."

The one I am always chasing after, Farideh thought.

"Isn't he marvelous?" Havilar said, though by the tone of her voice, Farideh could tell that the devil with his black, black eyes didn't have the same effect on Havilar at all. "The spell was

supposed to call an imp," she said, "but I must have gotten lucky. He's a cambion. Half-devil," she added. "And people say you're the smart one."

"No one says that," Farideh said, forcing herself to look away, to look at her sister. But still she could *feel* the cambion looking at her. "Listen to me: This isn't lucky. This is very bad. You have to send him back—right now."

"You're such a worrywart. He's safe. He can't harm anyone as long as he's in the circle and look—" She turned and made a series of rude gestures at the cambion. He regarded her with the same mild smile. "He's locked right in. He can't do any harm."

He can, Farideh thought. He is. She felt as if her mind were slowing down, as if her tongue were turning to clay. "Send him back. If anyone finds out you've summoned a devil—"

"I'm not sending him anywhere until Mehen has seen him. Maybe you won't be the smart one forever. This is a hundred times better than that dire rat he had me trap." She pulled off Farideh's scarf the rest of the way and wrapped it around her own neck. "Here, you watch him for a minute."

"What? I can't! You can't leave me—"

Havilar took up Farideh's cloak as well. "Yes, you can. Just don't mar the circle. That's important. Probably."

"Wait!" Farideh said, but Havilar was already out the door and into the snow.

Leaving Farideh alone with a devil who looked like walking sin.

He stood there—quiet, still, watching her intently. The silence felt so fragile, as if the slightest breath would shatter it. She thought of Criella's concern, of the fiendish blood undeniably coursing through her veins, ready to make her do something foolish. Or dangerous. For a long time she didn't dare move.

But then, neither did the devil. The circle—despite the fact that Havilar shouldn't have been able to do anything of the sort—was holding. He was only standing there.

She told herself to relax—she wasn't going to talk to him, she knew better than that, Criella was wrong—and bent down to pick up the book.

“You’re not like that one,” the cambion said.

Farideh lost her grip on the book and dropped it again. She stared up at the devil, but he was still standing there, still trapped in the circle. “What?”

“You are not like her,” he said. His voice slithered into her ears and Farideh shivered. She scooped up the book and held it to her like a shield.

“I … I thought you weren’t supposed to talk,” she said.

“I’m not able to do any harm,” he said, “and what harm is talking?” He smiled again, as if he knew what Farideh had been thinking before. “You’re not like her,” he repeated. “Like night and day. Like sweet and sour. Like the ocean and the desert.” He tilted his head. “It’s astonishing.”

Farideh flushed. “I don’t know what you mean by that. We’re twins. We’re alike tip to toe.”

The cambion tapped a finger below his right eye, the same eye as Farideh’s silver one. Farideh’s flush burned hotter.

“It’s only an eye.”

More than an eye though. Even the dragonborn who refused to see fate or the hands of the gods in anything, touched the hafts of their weapons when they spied her odd eyes. Bad enough to be a tiefling, the descendent of humans and fiends; worse still to be marked like that. If she’d come by it honestly—she knew they thought—by a blinding stroke, it would be one thing … but nothing normal was born with two-colored eyes.

“It’s a very *clever* eye,” the cambion said. “Both of them are. They see things your sister’s don’t.”

Farideh scowled at him. “It’s just an eye. It can’t see invisible doors. No spell-hidden creatures. No silver pieces in your ear—”

“Of course not,” he said, and like that, the wheedling tone was gone. “But you do see the way people look at you, devil’s child.”

Those black eyes, cold as a winter storm, were staring right into her heart and the sudden seriousness in his voice jolted her.

“What is it they say?” he asked. “One’s a curiosity, two’s a conspiracy—”

“Three’s a curse,” she finished. “You think I haven’t heard that rubbish before?”

“I *know* you have.” When she glared at him, he added, “It’s not as if I’m plumbing the depths of your mind, dear girl. That is the burden of every tiefling. Some break under it, some make it the millstone around their neck, some revel in it.” He tilted his head again, scrutinizing her, with that wicked glint in his eyes. “You fight it, don’t you? Like a little wildcat, I wager. Every little jab and comment just sharpens your claws.”

“I …” Farideh realized she was doing exactly what she had sworn not to do, and took hold of the book, crossing over to the shelves on the opposite side of the barn. So he was right—as he said, it wasn’t hard to guess. She slid the tome onto the shelf.

“Who could blame you?” the cambion went on. “Who wants to be held responsible for something they can’t control? Turned away because of something their foremothers and forefathers did to gain a little power?”

She was trying, but gods, he was prodding her in sore spots. “What do you know about my foremothers and forefathers?” she said. She kept her eyes on the spines of the books. “Maybe it *was* power that made them cross with devils, or maybe they didn’t have much choice. Maybe it was for some … greater good. *Maybe* it was love.”

The cambion broke into raucous laughter, and she felt herself flush.

“Ah! Is that what they tell you?”

“They … It just might have been that way, that’s all.” She looked back over her shoulder. “You weren’t there.”

A smile twisted the cambion’s lips, and Farideh blushed again. She’d been staring at his mouth. “Of course. All those mortal women swooning over gallant pit fiends. All those golden-hearted succubi blushing as men kiss their burning hands. My darling, let me tell you a secret: devils don’t love.”

Farideh looked at the door. Havilar would be back any minute, and with her, Mehen. Mehen would tell Havilar what a stupid thing

it was to call a devil and make her send him back. Or maybe he'd just pull out his falchion and slice the cambion in half.

When she looked back, the devil had taken a few steps closer to her, still toeing the edge of the circle of runes. She was still a good eight feet away, but there was nothing between them, and she was very aware of those eight empty feet.

"You're a half-devil," she said. "So if it's all about power, who wanted it there?"

His smile twitched, and for a moment she wondered if he had sore spots of his own. "Nobody. Least of all my father."

"Is he the devil?"

"No, that would be my mother," he said. "Invadiah, the fiercest erinyes of the Lady of Malbolge." There was a sour note to the way he said it.

Farideh didn't know what an erinyes was, but she suspected Criella would tell Mehen to keep a tighter rein on her if she did. Malbolge was the name of one of the Nine Hells. Her sense of dread deepened, though she pushed it aside. He was a devil—of course he came out of the Hells. He was still trapped in a circle Havilar made.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Farideh," she said.

The cambion clucked his tongue. "Anyone ever tell you, Farideh, that there's power in names?"

"You told me your mother's name pretty easily," she replied.

"True enough," he said. "And I'll even tell you mine, since I know you want to hear it. It's Lorcan."

"Well met," she said, and instantly felt foolish.

"Better than you think," he said. "We're even now. You can see I'm not like the others."

"What others?"

"Why, the ones who judge you," he said, with a wide gesture at the world beyond. "The ones who wait for you to fail."

"There's no one like that here," she said, even though that wasn't true. Criella. The dairyman, the blacksmith's apprentice, the tinkers, and others. They thought they were hiding it, but they watched her

when they thought she wouldn't notice, gauging her, waiting for her true nature to burst forth like a bud coming to poisonous bloom.

"So is that what this is?" Farideh said, hotly. "You're going to try and convince me to … to … what? Kill my neighbors? Corrupt them? I'm not going to—"

"Heavens to Hells, you're an excitable one," Lorcan said. "How old are you? Sixteen?"

"Seventeen."

"All but grown," he said. "Regardless, you're smart enough to know better than to do something just because I said it, I'd wager. I would have had an easier time snatching up your sister if I were *that* sort of fiend. I'm only here to help."

"I thought you were here because Havilar called you."

"And I *came,*" he said, "because I wanted to help."

"You can't help me."

"Oh? It doesn't take a seer to work out how your life will go."

Farideh shook her head again, as if she could stop listening to him. Leave, she told herself, leave now. She started toward the door.

"You'll live in this village for all of your life," Lorcan said, keeping pace with her along the border of the circle. "You'll spend every day trying your hardest to be what they want, and you'll never meet their expectations, because you were not made for this. You will always be their burden, the creature that turned up at the gates in swaddling."

Farideh stopped. "How do you know that?"

He smiled. "Your sister told me. They love *her*, don't they? But only so long as you keep after her, cleaning her messes and making sure no one realizes that she's causing so much trouble."

"Havi's not trouble."

"No," Lorcan said, with a chuckle. "She'd *never* do something foolish like summoning a devil because she thought it would be fun." Farideh bit her lip. "If you're lucky you'll succeed and she'll be safe. If you aren't—and darling, no one's *that* lucky—one day you'll slip, you'll miss, and she'll undo everything you've worked your entire life to protect. They'll throw you out of this village and into

the real world. She'll never see it coming because Havilar believes that people are *good* and they'll always love her and there's nothing wrong with playing along the lines of their expectations. Whoever finds her first will take her head if she's lucky. At least that way's quick."

As he spoke, Farideh saw the village, angry and afraid. A garrote, a chopping block, or an angry mob. Soldiers from somewhere else. Warrior-priests on horseback. Gods, it could come a thousand different ways. She'd *heard* it a thousand different ways from the villagers. Her blood would melt the snow …

"I wouldn't let that happen," she said. Tears choked her voice.

"Doesn't matter," Lorcan said. "It's an unhallowed grave, unmourned and alone for the both of you. There's no escaping that, no matter how perfect you are."

There isn't, Farideh thought—she'd always known that, hadn't she? Hard as she tried to be good, no one trusted her.

"I can help you, you know," Lorcan's crooning voice slid through her worries. "Simple as it comes. No one will ever hurt you. No one will ever hurt her either."

"No," Farideh said, though her thoughts felt slippery and loose. She covered her eyes and ducked her head. "No. Go away." Stay, she thought. Tell me.

"It's a simple thing," he said again. Lorcan set his hand, hot as an iron, on the bare spot between her shoulder blades, his fingers sliding just under the edge of her collar. "Not like what they tell you. Just say you're mine. That's all it takes."

"No." She couldn't. It would be everything she wasn't supposed to …

"You'll have the power to do as you please. You'll have the power to stop *them*. I'll give you everything and all you have to do is take it. Take the power. Say you're mine."

"No," she said, though her voice was growing fainter and her head was spinning. Why would she say no? She would be safe.

"No one touches a burning coal—and that's what you'll be, my darling, something so hot and bright and dangerous they dare not lay a hand on you. Someone tries to harm Havilar and you will stop

them. Someone tries to deny you what you truly deserve, you will show them their folly. Anyone comes to this village, looking for anyone who doesn't want to be found …" He trailed off.

She could not open her eyes now. "Yes?"

"You will be their savior," he whispered in her ear. "Tell me you don't want that?"

"I …" Farideh faltered. "I do."

"Free. Free to do as you please. Free to find whatever life you want." He pulled her close, very close. "Free to stop those who would hurt the innocent. Hurt your friends. Hurt Havilar." His breath burned against her skin. "You want that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You want me to give you that power?"

"Yes."

"You want to be mine?"

"Yes," she said, and with that her thoughts seemed to clear: *He's out of the circle*.

Farideh looked up in horror at the cambion, whose arms held her like an iron band. "No!" she cried.

"Too late, darling." He whispered in her ear, "It wouldn't have held the imp either."

Then everything caught fire.

Farideh woke to someone calling her name. There was a smell of burned wood and a chill breeze blowing over her skin. She opened her eyes to a heavy black snow swirling through the sky.

Not snow, she thought. Ashes. Fat black ashes. Like burnt paper.

She started to sit up and someone grabbed her arm. Havilar. She looked up at her sister, whose cheeks were streaked and spotted with a slurry of tears and clinging cinders. Beyond, the village—the whole village of Arush Vayem—stood, watching from a distance of a good twenty feet. Between the twins and the villagers, the ground was a flat stretch, cleared and charred as if something had exploded, burning away the grass and snow and … what else had been there?

Mehen stood in the middle, his falchion out and ready. But he was facing the villagers.

They're angry, Farideh thought muzzily. Something …

She remembered the stone barn and the cambion. Her breath sped up. Her nerves rattled with fear and pain and she realized her shoulder was screaming, and her dress had been torn open on that side.

From her collar to her elbow her golden skin had been branded with an elaborate design. She stared at it a moment and the lines seemed to form a flail. A flail and a smattering of lines that looked like a whirlwind. She touched it gingerly—it burned like a fever.

"Oh Fari," Havilar whispered. "What have you done?"



The time between waking in the wreckage of her home and finding herself sitting in the dark beside a campfire, somewhere in the foothills of the Smoking Mountains passed in a blur. She remembered shoving half-burnt things into a haversack. She remembered Mehen cursing the villagers in a string of Common and Draconic, blowing out a fork of lightning breath when the blacksmith's apprentice got too near. Criella shouting. Everyone shouting. Farideh had to leave. If Farideh was leaving then so was Havilar, if Havilar and Farideh were leaving, then so was Mehen, and damn them all and *karshoji Tiamat* come down on them. She remembered Havilar clinging to her arm with one hand and her glaive with the other, as if the two were all that could anchor her in the world. Mehen leading them up a mountain trail, muttering to himself in Draconic—they could not go to Tymanther, but where else could they go? The Black Ash Plain lay to the south, riddled with giants and their kin. The great Underchasm split Faerûn to the west. To the north lay Chessenta … and if Farideh's burn meant what he thought …

The lines that laced her shoulder were red and oozing. They ached. They itched. Worse, they *pulled*, as if the burn were a tether and something was holding the other end.

Mehen settled a blanket over her shoulders. “You should go to sleep,” he said gently. Havilar was already fast asleep, sprawled facedown with her horns curling back from the ground.

“I’m not tired,” she said, hardly above a whisper. Her throat ached from the effort of not crying. She couldn’t—not after all she’d done.

He was silent for a moment. “We’ll be all right.”

Farideh nodded, though she couldn’t see how.

“Farideh,” Mehen said. She looked up. “Trust me. I’ve done this before.”

“And so we can’t go to Tymanther,” she said dully.

Mehen snorted. “There’s a lot more world than Arush Vayem and Tymanther. We’ll make our way, take bounties or serve as guards. We’ll find someone to help you get rid of that pact, and we can come back.”

Farideh pulled the blanket close. “You know we can’t.” She squeezed her eyes shut. The cambion had been right. One mistake, and she was as good as dead.

Fine—if that was how the world was going to treat her, perhaps she’d just keep whatever the cambion offered, and to the Hells with them all. If they all thought her damned, better to damn herself right.

The thought frightened her, but there it was.

Mehen was watching her. “If you’re not going to sleep, keep watch. Wake me when you’re tired. Or if you hear anything.”

Farideh doubted she would ever be tired again. Once Mehen had gone to his own bedroll and dropped off to sleep, she let herself weep quietly into her hands.

“What on all the planes are you crying for?” a voice said. “You’re much better off now than you were.”

She froze like a rabbit before a wolf, looking up at Lorcan silhouetted in the firelight. He was still ferociously handsome, still unspeakably fiendish, and this time there was no circle—not even a broken, haphazard one—to separate them. Havilar and Mehen slept on.

“Are you here to take my soul then?” she said quietly.

Lorcan burst into laughter. “Oh, Glasya skin me, that’s adorable. No, I’m not here to harvest you. We have an agreement, and I’m here to see to that.”

“Oh.” She wondered what exactly it was she had bargained away in the heat of the moment and the tangle of his pretty words. “But you will? Is that what this is?”

“Dear girl,” he said, “the king of the Hells’ own blood runs in your veins. A soul was never a certainty for you. I’d suggest you stop worrying about it.”

“So I *am* doomed,” she said. “And you *are* here to take me.”

“There you are again,” he said, with a shake of his head, “being melodramatic. I’m merely giving you some perspective. That isn’t the sort of deal we’ve made at all.”

“You’re talking in circles again,” she said.

“My darling, I already told you: If all I wanted was a petty little soul, there were dozens I could have snapped up quicker and neater than yours.”

She pulled the blanket closer around her shoulders. “Then what *do* you want?”

“A warlock.” He stepped closer. “You, in particular, as my warlock.”

She shook her head. “I don’t … I don’t know what you mean.”

He gave her a dark look, as if she were being deliberately obtuse, but she could only shake her head again. Lorcan sighed. “It means you’re bound to me. For the pleasure, I grant you powers. Powers you seemed to dearly want, before.”

“Spells?” she asked. “What … what do I have to do?”

“Nothing. You’ll find it’s much simpler than other sorts of spell-casting. Now,” he said, his eyes gleaming in the firelight, “do you want a taste of what you’ve purchased?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know that I do.” And he wasn’t telling her what she’d purchased those powers with, she couldn’t help but notice. “Why me?”

He shrugged. “Call it a whimsy of my character. I have certain preferences for my warlocks.”

“Warlocks?” she said, emphasizing the plural.

“You aren’t exactly my first,” he said with a chuckle.

Farideh started to ask him who the others were—whether they, too, were caught in the net of their own fears and wants, whether they were afraid of him, whether they were pretty—and stopped herself. She didn’t want to know.

He set his hands on his hips. “Come now,” he said after a moment, “what are you thinking?”

“That you don’t seem dangerous,” she admitted. “Which makes me suspect you are very dangerous.”

“I hope that is not a logic you apply to your everyday life.”

“No,” Farideh said. “Just devils … and the like.”

“I’m only half a devil.”

“That’s enough like a devil.” Her voice hitched, and she pressed a hand to her mouth, willing herself not to cry again. But it was too much and the tears overcame her.

“Oh Hells,” he said, holding out a hand, “come here.”

She didn’t know how he snatched her wrist away from the layers of the blanket, how he pulled her free of it and to her feet, but as soon as she realized he was moving and she should stop him, Lorcan had her tucked against him, her back pressed to his chest, his arms wrapped around her.

“You’re freezing,” he commented. Fortunately he was warmer than the fire.

She stiffened, and kept her eyes resolutely on Mehen’s sleeping form. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Proving you haven’t doomed yourself. Really, I’m a pleasant enough fellow if you give me a chance.”

She was sure in her heart of hearts that Lorcan would say anything if it meant she’d stay bound to him. But that night, far from home and far from any future, she was still seventeen, still a girl, and still desperately lonesome. She stayed where she was.

“Why me?” she said. “You said … ‘the king of the Hells’ own blood.’ Is that why?”

“*All* tieflings have the blood of Asmodeus,” he said. “Regardless of who first dirtied the well. An effect of the ascension—it’s terribly boring. Don’t worry about it.”

Farideh pursed her lips. “I don’t like people telling me what to think.”

“Fascinating. How do you feel about people telling you what to *do*?”

He snatched up her hands in his own. Her breath caught—her double concerns twining over each other. She’d heard stories enough of people who lost their souls by not paying close enough attention to canny devils.

But at the same time no one had ever grabbed her hands like that. Lorcan’s hands were strong, and she found herself considering how much larger than hers they were.

If he held tight, she didn’t think she could break away.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

She gave a little shake of her head. She didn’t want to, and yet she did. She wanted to see what he was going to try—it wasn’t as if anyone had tried anything on her—but she wasn’t a fool and she knew he was up to no good.

“Close your eyes. Think about your burn,” he said. “And think about the world.”

“The whole world?”

“Yes. Think about Toril.”

Tempted, Farideh tried, but it was like trying to think about how to walk or how the color yellow looked—Toril was Toril. She opened her eyes.

“I don’t know how—”

“Stop talking,” he said, “and concentrate.”

Farideh closed her eyes again, and instead, thought of the ground. The way it felt to stand solid and to spread her weight between both feet in one of Mehen’s fighting stances. She thought of the cold, dry air and the wind that stirred the snow over the solidness of the mountains. She thought of the sun and Selûne looking down at her, and the color of the moon goddess’s light on the rocks and the snow. The stillness of the cold winter night and the sound of the breath through her nostrils and the heat and pop of the fire.

And the burn—no, she thought, not burn. Brand. Lorcan could call it whatever pleased him, the lines that laced her shoulder were

more than a burn. Tieflings didn't burn easily—she and Havilar had scared Mehen enough times, snatching dropped bits of bread or meat right out of the flames, quick enough that they didn't feel a thing. Only setting fire to their sleeves now and again.

But this burn, this brand, was no more a part of Toril than Lorcan was. Farideh knew that all the way to her marrow. The way it pulled at her, the way it still ached after hours and hours and Mehen's ministrations. The brand was something magical, and it tied her to Lorcan.

And something tied *him* to someplace … *else*. If she let her thoughts drift along the bindings, she could sense another world beyond Toril.

The Nine Hells.

Farideh swallowed hard and opened her eyes.

"You've noticed," Lorcan said.

She nodded, not wanting him to be a devil, not wanting him to be a monster. Not wanting to have said anything to him in the first place, if she could just wish for things to be true, so that she wouldn't be standing there, as unsafe as she could be.

Lorcan let go of her hand and traced the lines of the brand peeking through her hastily mended dress. "This mark is what connects you to the powers of the Hells. Well," he amended, "rather it's what lets you channel them. Through me. Easier than spellbooks."

"Does it hurt?"

"You'll be fine."

She looked back over her shoulder. "I meant you. Does it hurt you?"

He smiled—such a wicked, wicked smile. "I'll be fine too. Here's your first lesson." Lorcan took her hands up again. "Think about that connection. You were close. You felt the power."

She still could—it was like a primed pump, waiting for someone to grab hold of the handle and start it flowing. And it seemed to want her to grab hold of it, as if it were aware, as if it wanted to flow through her.

"What will it do?" she asked.

“Nothing,” Lorcan said, “unless you take hold of it.”

She opened her eyes. “Is this how you’re going to take my soul?”

He sighed. “Lords. If I promise to leave your soul alone for the time being will you just do what I say?”

Farideh laughed bitterly. “What’s your promise worth?”

“Plenty,” he said, sounding affronted. “I’m not some *demon* or something. I keep my word.”

“You lied about the circle.”

“I didn’t lie. I wasn’t *forthcoming*. There’s a difference. And I give you my most solemn word that you can keep whatever semblance of a soul you’ve managed, devil-child—unless you *want* to give it up—if you just do what I say.”

“For now,” Farideh added. “If I do what you say for now.”

He chuckled again. “You are terribly melodramatic. For *now*.”

Farideh hesitated again, sensing the power lying just out of reach. It seemed, she thought, to be only a part of something larger, a fraction of the Nine Hells, and still it was vast and roiling. She wondered if she managed to open that channel wider, like the breaking of a dam, if it would surge through her and Lorcan and kill them both.

“You know,” Lorcan said, “you are bound to come up against bandits. Or monsters. Or just people who don’t like the look of you. Maybe those neighbors of yours will decide you need more punishment than just banishment. This will help. For all I’m sure your dragonborn has trained you with a sword, you’re not practiced enough with it.”

“How do you know that?” she asked.

He rubbed his thumb over her palm in a slow circle. “Calluses. Your hands are far too smooth.”

She blushed to the roots of her hair.

Later, Farideh would think if anyone ever asked her about that night, she would need to invent a story—something where she acted because she was prideful and thought she could handle what she should have known she could not; or because Lorcan was clever and she was grief-stricken and foolish; or because she was forced against her will to grasp the powers of a warlock.

Anything, she would think, is better than the truth—that I reached for the powers of the Hells so I wouldn't have to think of something to say to the half-devil stirring up my blood in ways I didn't want to think about anymore.

The power poured into her, like slick, dark water filling a basin, and churned through her, stirring through every vessel, every part of her.

"Say *adaestuo,*" Lorcan said.

She opened her eyes. "*Adaestuo*."

The power seemed to burst into being in the air before her mouth and, channeled by her outstretched hands, streamed across the clearing and exploded against a fir tree with a sickly violet light.

Farideh stared, agape, at the force of it. The wood had splintered and charred where the blast had struck it, and embers of purple light still scintillated at its edges. A single word and she'd blown off a piece of the tree nearly as large as her head.

She might never please Mehen with her sword work, she might never rival Havilar's skill with her glaive, but this … this was breathtaking.

It was also loud. At the explosion, Havilar sat bolt upright. Mehen did not wake so much as materialize on his feet, falchion in hand. His eyes went straight to the tree, with its ring of strange, purplish embers … and then followed the path of the blast back to Farideh, her hands in Lorcan's.

She tried to leap away, to put as much space between her and the cambion as she could, but she couldn't move. Lorcan had folded his arms around her, as if this were nothing, as if no one were watching, as if Mehen weren't advancing on him with his bare blade.

"You were made for this," he whispered, and kissed her, just under her cheekbone. He vanished, and Farideh lost her balance and fell to the ground under the astonished stares of her sister and guardian.

CHAPTER ONE

The High Road, two days south of Neverwinter

10 Kythorn, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

(Six months later)

The wagon limped along the High Road more slowly than Brin could have walked, but after well over a month, he was tired of walking. To be honest, he was tired of wagons as well, and ships and horses too. He was tired of moving, and the call from the lead wagon that the caravan had reached the city of Neverwinter couldn't come soon enough.

Brin watched the road behind them, stretching on beyond another four lumbering carts of former refugees returning to rebuild the city that had fallen nearly a quarter century ago. He did not see—as he feared—the cloud of dust on the horizon that half-a-dozen knights on chargers would kick up as they pelted along the dirt road.

This didn't calm him the way it should have. In fact, the longer he didn't see any sign of his cousin, Constancia, the more he worried she was just behind the last hill, ready to grab him by the ear and haul him home. He looked up at the clouds hanging in the blue summer sky and wondered if he had made an enormous mistake.

Constancia would say so: It was irresponsible. It was foolish. It was possibly illegal. And why, she would ask, by the lions of Azoun, Neverwinter?

The call had gone out halfway across the continent that the Open Lord of Waterdeep was rebuilding Neverwinter out of its shattered ruins, and all her citizens—and their descendants—were encouraged

and invited to return. Among the thousands of people filtering in through the city gates, no one would notice one more boy.

And there was the city's history—the famed clockworks and fanciful buildings, the artisans whose creations were still prized—that had caught Brin's attention. And the catastrophic death of the city by earthquake and volcano, that had held it.

But perhaps most of all, it was far enough away that no one would know who he was or what he'd done or what he might have done if things were a little different—

"Is something troubling you?"

Brin looked up at the man sitting beside him, who had also paid the cart's owner to carry him to Neverwinter.

"No," Brin lied. "Just thinking."

The man was a Calishite, perhaps in his forties or fifties, slim and muscular. The threads of gray in the man's hair might as well have been ornaments and the crinkles in his brown skin, paint for all he wore his age. He smiled, one corner of his mouth crooked by a small scar where something had once cut the skin deeply. Brin wondered how someone came by a scar like that, and his eyes strayed briefly to the chain the man wore wrapped around his waist like a belt.

The man gave Brin a look that Brin was accustomed to getting from adults, down his broken nose, as if the man knew very well that Brin was lying. He nodded at the flute Brin wore tucked into his own belt. It was the only thing Brin had taken that he didn't strictly need. It had been his father's.

Brin's hand tapped the holes of the flute.

"You seemed nervous," the man said. "Do you play?"

"Oh," Brin said. He set his hand back down on the cart bed. "Yes."

"But you're not a musician?"

"What makes you say that?"

The man shrugged. "You haven't played it once since you joined us in Waterdeep. In my experience, someone who depends on their skills to eat doesn't give them a chance to get rusty." He smiled

again. “You’ll have to forgive me. There’s not much to do on this stretch of the road but observe each other. I’m called Tam.”

“Brin.” Whatever other attributes Constancia and the rest of their family had tried to impress onto Brin, they had succeeded in making him curious about other people and observant enough of the minor details that hinted at a whole. His eyes dropped to the silver pin on the man’s shoulder—a pair of eyes surrounded by seven stars. The symbol of Selûne. Another pin sat below it. But it was pinned from the inside of his cloak. Curious.

Tam followed his gaze. “Suppose the game’s a little duller if I wear my profession on my sleeve, hm?”

“Suppose so,” Brin said. “Do you like being a priest?”

Tam studied Brin for a moment, as if he were trying to divine whether Brin was making conversation or if he was really curious. Brin made himself stay quiet—let him guess.

“It’s a calling,” Tam said finally, “and it suits me. Mostly.”

Which, as far as callings went, sounded like a decent set of cards to be dealt in Brin’s opinion. Maybe the Moonmaiden was a more generous mistress than most.

“What doesn’t suit you?”

Tam leaned forward. “Traveling,” he said in conspiratorial tones.

Brin smiled because he was supposed to—the pin might be the mark of a Selûnite, but the spiked chain that looked older than Brin had nothing to do with the Moonmaiden and neither did the canny look in Tam’s eye. At least I’m not the only liar in this wagon, he thought. He wondered if the priest realized his little game of observation went both ways.

“Aren’t you a little young to have fled Neverwinter?” Tam asked.

“Not me,” Brin said. “My parents.” The parents had been part of the story since the beginning—they were his ticket to Neverwinter.

“Ah,” Tam said. “Of course. Where did they head?”

“Darromar,” Brin said, the same city he’d told the wagon driver. Before, it had been Westgate and before that Yhaunn. Later, he thought, he might say Waterdeep—a city big enough that even if he met a Waterdhavian, they wouldn’t bat an eye if they didn’t know the same people or the same areas.

Lying out in the world was easier than lying at home—for one, nobody here assumed Brin *was* lying when he opened his mouth, and nobody criticized his lies once he told them. The tricky part was keeping his story straight when he had to keep changing things.

"Oh?" Tam said. "I lived in Athkatla for some years."

Brin nodded, racking his brain. Athkatla … was the capital of Amn—south. Not so far south as Darromar, and while Athkatla was closer—probably—to Darromar than they were now, they were far enough apart that Brin would have no cause to have visited the larger town … except—

"Was the road north always that bad?" he said. "It felt like we'd never make it to Waterdeep."

Tam shrugged. "It was a long time ago. I left on the road east."

Brin shrugged and looked back at the road again, a bad feeling creeping through his thoughts. If Tam didn't mention Athkatla because of the road, then why? Was he just looking for something they had vaguely in common? Or was he trying to catch Brin in a lie? He looked at the odd priest out of the corner of his eye.

He'd felt sure that no one who knew he'd left would be willing to send out hunters or postings. He'd assumed they would just send Constancia and her warrior-priests …

He's not a bounty hunter, Brin told himself. And if he were, he couldn't be sure Brin was who he was looking for: There were no portraits to show a hunter, and besides, Brin had stained his blond hair regularly since leaving Cormyr. A hunter would be told he was seventeen, but Brin had been relying on his short height and scrawny build to pass for younger—the wagon master thought he was fourteen, which would have mortified Brin a few months ago but now felt like a special triumph. And the hunter would be looking for someone to answer to another name.

Still Brin was sure of none of these things, and his stomach pulled with the familiar unease that puzzling out someone else's motives always gave him.

"Where are you coming from?" Brin asked the strange priest.

Tam smiled again, but there was still that look in his eye. As if he knew they were playing a game. As if he could manipulate and

maneuver all day long against a little turncoat Cormyrian. As if he knew exactly how Brin's stomach felt, and how weak that made him.

"Westgate," he said.

"Did you flee Neverwinter then?"

"No, just lending a hand." Tam seemed to consider Brin a moment, and he was a little less certain of his assessment—Brin's mother used to give him a similar look. "Are you sure nothing's weighing on you?"

"It's weighing on me that you keep asking that," Brin said as lightly as he could. "I must look wretched. How soon will we reach Neverwinter, do you think?"

Tam began to answer, but a ululating cry out of the forest startled both of them, and no amount of maneuvering or manipulating would have made any difference then.



"Come on," Havilar said, stomping her foot. "Hurry up. A good hard sprint and we'll catch them."

It was too hot to be sprinting after anyone. Farideh shifted her haversack to her right shoulder. Her scar itched where the strap had rubbed against it for the last few miles. The sweat that trickled over her skin made the itch sting in places.

"Do that," Mehen said, coming to stand beside her on the crest of the road, "and you'll spook our bounty." He raised a spyglass to one eye.

"You don't even know the bounty's *on* the caravan," Havilar protested. "Because you won't let us catch up!"

"What do you think is going to happen if we wait?" Farideh asked, joining them. "We're miles from anywhere." Ahead on the road, the caravan that had been slipping in and out of sight for the past day was close enough to make out the black dog hanging its head over the edge of the last cart, the bright pink of its tongue.

"This one might … I don't know … run into the woods and join up with bandits," Havilar said, "and then what will we do? Hmm?

Creep through a bandit fortress for another three bloody tendays?”

Mehen collapsed the spyglass. “Havi, calm down. Let them get ahead. Let them get to the next waystation if they need to. Then at least we’ll have a room and someone we can buy passage to the next Tormish temple from. We’ll catch up. Go practice with your glaive.”

Farideh watched the last wagon hobble over a stone in the roadway. Three tendays had passed since Mehen had taken on the bounty in Proskur, and more and more Farideh suspected they were on the wrong track altogether.

Not that she was an expert; Mehen had done such work in the time between leaving his clan and settling in Arush Vayem, and returned to it quickly enough when they left there. But none of the bounties they’d had in the last six months had been this difficult—

Her scar suddenly flared, hotter than the baked road. She drew a sharp breath and clapped a hand to her shoulder. The pain faded, but Farideh knew it would come again. It came when the cambion was watching her, and it meant he was angry or annoyed or just wanting her attention. It meant he would come. Farideh tensed.

She had no idea why Lorcan was stirred-up—the *gods* probably didn’t know why he was stirred-up. If he came … Oh Hells, if he came with the caravan so near, they would all be in so much danger. And Mehen would never let her forget it. She rubbed her arm, as if she could rub away the lingering sensation of Lorcan’s pique.

Calm, she told herself. She shut her eyes and tried to breathe more slowly. None of that’s happened.

The burn flared again.

She opened her eyes and cursed. She’d told the cambion—repeatedly—that he couldn’t just appear in front of Mehen and not expect to get them both into trouble. At least Lorcan had stopped appearing as if he were merely coming by to borrow some butter. Now, he needled at her brand until she removed herself from any company. It was only a matter of time before Mehen noticed that, too, not that Lorcan cared.

Bastard, she thought, then wished she hadn't. She wondered what he wanted.

Farideh looked back at Havilar and at Mehen, who was watching her grimly.

"Fari, come spar with your sister."

Farideh watched her sister's fluid sweeps of the wicked-looking blade, her quick jabs with its sharp end.

"Why?"

"Because you need practice," Mehen said. "And it will help … It will give you something to distract yourself with."

Farideh pursed her lips, but drew her short sword. She turned the hilt in her hand to get the proper grip, the leather wrappings slick and still uncomfortable in her damp palms. Havilar gave her a skeptical look.

"So are we doing basic passes, then?"

Farideh sighed. "Whatever you'd like."

"You can't do what I'd like," Havilar said. "But it's not going to help *me* to go easy on you with Kidney Carver."

"Kidney Carver?"

"My glaive," Havilar said. "It needs a name. Every warrior worth talking about has a weapon with a name."

"Kidney Carver?"

"It's … carved kidneys," she said. "Or close enough."

"Girls," Mehen warned.

Havilar rolled her eyes. "Come on," she said to Farideh, "get your guard up. You start defensive."

Farideh readjusted her grip and brought the sword up in front of her. The glaive swung down in a careful arc, and she caught it on the flat of the blade, shoving it aside. Havi tried again, sweeping the glaive up under Farideh's sword this time, and Farideh stepped out of its reach, knocking Havilar's guard open.

Farideh went through the motions like the steps in a dance she only half knew. Parry, dodge, parry, reverse … She counted on the fact that Havilar would go through the passes as rote as possible, if only because she thought Farideh couldn't handle anything more. It gave Farideh a chance to think about other things—about the

bounty, about Mehen's disappointed expression, about the searing pain that laced her shoulder—so she didn't bother giving Havilar any other impression.

Farideh's brand stung so sharply she gasped. At the same moment, Havilar's glaive came up hard into Farideh's sword.

Farideh yelped and loosed her grip. The glaive locked under her guard, and sent her sword sailing over Havilar's head and into the brambles beyond. Mehen heaved a great sigh and covered his face with one hand.

"Gods," Havilar said. "Did you *throw* that?"

"You know I didn't," Farideh snapped. She wiped the sweat from her hand on her skirt. Her shoulder was on fire. "Go get it, would you?" she begged.

"Hells, no," Havilar said. "I don't want to dig through brambles. You lost it. You get it."

"Fari, go get your damned sword," Mehen said. "A few brambles won't hurt you."

Farideh hesitated. She couldn't tell Mehen why she didn't want to go. Better he think she was so fragile as to be afraid of some thorns. Not like Havilar, she thought, as she ducked into a break in the canes where some animal had made a path, and wove her way through the brambles.

The fat smell of blackberries baking in the sun and the buzz of wasps swallowed Farideh. The brambles snagged at her loose robe with every step. When she'd woken that morning to the already-humid air, she'd thought it better than her leather armor. Now, as she untangled thorns from the fabric and waited for Lorcan to appear, she just felt foolish.

She finally stepped free of the thorns and into the open forest. On the other side of the brambles, the hill fell away down through a sparse gathering of pines and spreading maples, their feet carpeted in ferns and overlaid with the remnants of cracked boulders.

And no devils. She waited a moment, but there was nothing. Perhaps he'd had his fun needling her while Mehen grew suspicious.

A little searching found her sword caught on the overhanging canes that had launched themselves over their predecessors in

greedy arcs down the hill. She ducked beneath them and wound her hand between the thorns and blackberries, then snaked the sword out, hilt-first, the same way. Through the brambles, she could just hear Havilar and Mehen's voices, but not what they were saying. She sheathed the sword.

A breeze stirred the air and lifted the sweaty hair off Farideh's neck.

Out of the breeze, a pair of hands grabbed ahold of her shoulders. Startled, Farideh turned sharply, bringing her elbow around to slam into her attacker's arm. As she turned, she caught a glimpse of Lorcan's red skin and his wings. She pulled her arm back against her chest, sending her off balance, and onto one knee.

"Gods," she hissed. She glared up at him. "Why must you do that?"

"I was starting to worry your arm had been cut off," Lorcan said, sounding anything but worried. "Or were you just playing hard to get?"

Farideh let him help her to her feet. "You shouldn't be here."

"You *forced* me to," he said. "You're going to get hurt if you keep on like this."

"What? Havi? She gets enthusiastic, but she knows when to pull —"

"Not your sister—although we can discuss what an *utter* waste of time *that* was, later. No, I meant the orcs."

Farideh shook her head. "What orcs?"

He turned her to face north, and left his hands lingering on her shoulders. "Other side of the road, up on the hillside there. There's an ambush waiting. Maybe a dozen fellows—axes, arrows, at least one shaman. A wonder dear Mehen didn't spot it."

"That's …" She turned out of his hands. "… kind of you, actually. We'll avoid them."

"Of course you will." He smiled and her heart beat to match the throb of her scar. "And even if you didn't, what are a few orcs? You'd burn them to ashes. I'm not worried about that."

"What then?"

“Darling,” he said, taking hold of her arm and walking her back toward the part in the brambles, “they don’t want you. They don’t even know you’re here. They’re waiting for that caravan, which is carrying a score of people, including children. Also at least two priests—the kind who won’t be happy to see you. The orcs are out of supplies, they’re lost and they’re hungry—they aren’t looking to leave survivors. Which means you’re going to have to decide.” He ran a finger over her jaw and said, low in her ear, “Do you keep safe and hidden and wait for the people to die, or do you aid the caravan with everything you have?”

A scream split the air, and Lorcan vanished. Farideh stumbled at the sudden lack of him.

A part of her—the part that was still Arush Vayem through and through—insisted she drop to the ground and stay behind the wall of thorns where it was safe. This wasn’t her fight. She couldn’t help. And if she did, the priests would be after her.

She pushed past it and past the brambles. It might be safe this breath. It wouldn’t be safe if the orcs triumphed. And people were going to die.

“Ambush!” she cried, as she broke through to the road. “There’s an ambush! Orcs!”

Mehen and Havilar were already on their feet, watching the caravan downhill. Mehen’s yellow eyes locked on Farideh and he pulled her through the last of the brush.

“A dozen,” she said. “Archers, axemen, a priest or something. There are children in the caravan.”

Mehen spat out a curse and scooped up his pack. “Where did you —”

“Lorcan,” she said, her pulse in her throat. She took up her haversack.

“Bloody, *karshoji henish*—”

“I *know*. He was only warning—”

“Later,” Mehen growled. “Come on.” They raced down the hill toward the caravan and the orcs pouring out of the woods. Mehen slid to a stop, taking in the battlefield.

“Farideh, *stay here,*” Mehen barked.

“I could cast—”

“No,” he shouted, halting long enough to turn and make sure she stopped as well. “Keep out of the way. You *stab* them if they get too close. Havilar, with me. Don’t get sloppy.”

“Wait!” Farideh called, but they both sprinted into the chaos of the road, and were gone.

A few score feet separated Farideh from the end of the caravan, from the clatter of blades, from the bellows of orcs, the screaming horses, and the singing of arrows through the air. From the heavy thud that carried farther than she’d ever expected as an arrow sank deeply into a man’s chest and toppled him. Mehen was right—she was too nervous for fighting.

She had to do something. She *could* do something—she thought of the spells Lorcan had given her. She could take out the archers without entering the fray. It was a better solution than Mehen’s, by far. She sheathed her sword.

Spurred by her nerves, the powers that swirled through her spread outward in a cloak of shadowy smoke, a miasma that blurred her and made it harder to spot where she stood. A little protection at least.

She tried to focus, to draw up the powers Lorcan’s pact granted her, but her nerves were jangling. There were too many eyes ready to stare at her.

There are too many eyes, she thought, but they’re too busy to notice you. If you don’t do something they’ll all be dead, and their eyes will be treats for the crows.

She clutched at the stream of magic that ran through her and hurled a rain of fiery bolts toward the forest, far from the crowd, over where the arrows seemed to fall from. She cast another, frustrated—who knew if she were even hitting anything?

Then she saw a boy, about her own age, running toward the thorns that lined the road, chased by orcs. He didn’t see her—she was sure—but she saw the look of fear in his eyes.

The orcs were going to kill him, and he knew it.

No one else was going to save him. She drew hard on the powers of the Hells.

CHAPTER TWO

A CHORUS OF BOWSTRINGS SANG OUT AND THE DRIVER OF THE WAGON behind them screamed, an arrow sunk into his side. Orcs boiled out of the brush, axes clattering on their shields. The little girls in the wagon woke, eyes wide, startling at screams and too shocked to listen to their father's orders to lie flat in the cart.

All around Brin, people who'd been riding along, quiet as you please, pulled weapons from under provisions and wagon seats and jumped from their carts under a hail of arrows. Tam leaped out of the cart as well and unwound the spiked chain he wore around his narrow waist.

"Shar and hrast." The priest spat. He shoved a dagger into Brin's hand. "Under the cart. Stay low and hamstring them as they pass." His chain lashed out, suddenly alive with holy fire, and caught an orc that sprang onto the road by the throat.

Brin's ears were buzzing loud enough to drown out the screaming. He looked down at the blade in his hand—rougher than the one in his pack, smaller than the short sword he had in the cart bed. What had the priest said?

What had Constancia said? *Loyal Fury, you fight like an* actor. *You'll faint the first time someone draws a sword on you, Torm help me —*

Brin gripped the blade, despite the fact he *did* feel light-headed and sick—he *knew* how to use a bloody dagger!

He looked up in time to duck a notched axe blade. It sliced past his head and slammed into the side of the wagon.

Instinct made him turn the dagger into the orc's partly bare chest. It sliced through his pectoral and immediately caught on a rib. The

orc screamed, a sound more of rage than pain, as he struggled against the stuck axe head.

Brin bolted.

The loose dirt of the forest floor made him slip, and his legs seemed suddenly too long and clumsy, but he ran as fast as he could as the clashing sounds of battle built behind him. There was no room in his head for thoughts of what Constancia would think, what the priest would think, what Torm—the god of duty himself—would think. All Brin knew was that he needed to get as far as possible from the orc with the axe.

Another fearsome roar rattled the air and a creature—half man and half dragon it seemed—barreled up the road. The refugees turned to contend with this new front. But the huge, wicked-looking sword the dragon-man carried avoided the humans and cut into one orc after another. He roared, and the crackle of lightning spread out from his mouth, leaping from orc to orc.

After him, on feet as quick as a deer's, a devil dressed in well-fitted scale armor used a glaive to stab one orc and then vaulted over his body to kick a second.

Brin's foot caught a wagon rut as he sprinted past. He sprawled forward, skinning his nose on the ground. He turned over, at the thud of feet. Axe-wielding orcs, three of them now, were chasing him down.

He hadn't even made it across the road.

The orc in the lead slowed, just enough to pull his axe back over one shoulder.

Torm forgive me, Brin thought. He wished he could apologize to Constancia.

Crack!

With a gust of flames and shadows, something, some creature stood between Brin and the orcs, a horned thing in purple robes with a twitching tail. It raised both hands, gave a soft gasp of effort, and where the robes had fallen down its arms—its human arms—Brin saw veins suffused with black. Horrible clouds of something caustic and dark billowed out toward the orcs. Their screams drowned out the sounds of the fight beyond.

The thing turned on Brin. He glimpsed a face like a girl's, but with strange eyes and horns. A devil.

"Oh, Loyal Torm," he managed, before she grabbed him firmly by the arm, and he was yanked … *away*. The world dropped out from under him, and it felt as if he were being dragged through a bonfire.

He blinked, and suddenly, he was coughing at the sharp taste of brimstone and looking up at the fir tree that had been a solid twenty feet to his right when she'd first grabbed his arm.

The devil wasn't looking at him. She was watching the orcs. One lay on the ground, half out of the thicket and dead or at least stunned into stillness, but the other two were trying to figure out where the devil and Brin had gone.

She didn't give them much time to wonder. She tensed again, as something seemed to pulse through her. She spoke a soft word, and a smattering of missiles—a hail of burning sulfur—rained down on the orcs. They howled again, and sprinted toward the devil.

Brin pulled himself up and to his feet. He'd lost the dagger, but … surely there was something he could do to stop her … send her back to—

The devil cast another hail of fire and one of the orcs racing toward them went down. She grabbed Brin by the hand as the orcs reached them, but he twisted, trying to break free. The closest orc's axe darted out awkwardly, and the flat of it smashed into Brin's thigh as it swung past.

The devil twisted and punched a fist under the orc's upraised arm. The orc cried out and dropped the axe. The devil gasped another word in some infernal language.

Again all Brin smelled was brimstone and they were suddenly a few cart-lengths ahead of where they'd been, beyond the fir tree and behind some brush that overhung the side of the road. Brin fell to the ground and cried out with pain. The creature looked down at him, one eye blazing gold, the other silver. "Stay back!"

The second devil was nearly on top of them. She twisted, her glaive catching two orc warriors in the throat in quick succession,

the end thrusting back into the first's belly for good measure, as the first devil caught the same orc with a blaze of flames.

This close he could make out their faces—nearly identical. The same sort of devil. The world was full of monsters.

"What are you doing?" the devil with the glaive shouted.

"Changing the plan!"

"Well hit the damned archers at least!"

The devil who had Brin dragged another rain of sulfur into existence, sending the missiles searing through the forest. Screams followed. She did it again, the blackness suffusing her veins like rot.

He looked up to see the orc who had wounded him running toward them, his features fixed in fury.

"Ye gods!" he cried. He raised his hands, praying furiously—

The orc roared and swung his axe again. The devil-girl holding Brin by the arm didn't flinch. Her hand came up again, and this time a great gout of flame streaked out of it.

The last of the three orcs toppled over, smoldering slightly and not moving. Another dozen or so lay dead around the caravan, and the remainder were running, crashing through the woods. The scaled man poked at a few orcs' bodies. The other devil made a few flourishes with her glaive, but the battle had ended. Brin saw the priest drop his chain and rush to the side of a woman whose shirtfront was soaked through with blood. She wasn't the only casualty. Brin's hands started to itch.

"Are you all right?" the devil said, bringing him sharply back to the present. Her voice shook and her breath came hard. She reached out to touch his neck where the vein pulsed.

He slapped her hand away and she fell back. He tried to scuttle away, but a sharp pain in his leg reminded him it was injured. The devil leaned down and grabbed his hands again. But instead of teleporting, she hushed him.

"Look," she said, her voice still light and uneven. "Look, you're going to hurt yourself. *Stop it.*" She pulled a vial off her belt and held it out to him. "Here. Here! Drink it."

He shoved it away. The gods only knew what was in there. She looked around—they were partially hidden behind an overgrown

broom shrub. No one would see. No one would stop her …

Gods, gods, she was going to—

"Take the potion," she said gently. "You're having a fit of shock."

"You …" He paused and swallowed. "You can't trick me like that. Can't kidnap me."

She sighed. "If I wanted to kidnap you, don't you think I would have already done it? You've got a wounded leg and you're panicking." She gave him a sad look. "I'm trying to help. You're going to have a hard time walking if you don't tend it."

"Where … where are you going to make me walk?" he said, his voice drying up. Her cheeks burned brightly and she looked away.

The second devil-girl strode up and planted her bloodied glaive, tilting it away from her. "Eater of Her Enemies' Livers," she interrupted with a wicked glee. "I just thought of it."

Her twin glared up at her. "Not now."

"Why?" She seemed to notice Brin. "Oh. Well met. Is he dying?"

"No."

"Good," she said. "Then: Eater of Her Enemies' Livers?"

The first devil sighed. "No. It's too many words."

The second girl scowled. "But they're all the *right* words."

"It sounds pretentious."

"You *mean* 'glorious.' " The second girl wrinkled her nose and turned to Brin. "What do you think?"

"Ab-about what?" he said. He swallowed. Was this how devils tricked one? Why couldn't he remember? He could hear the clerics who had given him his lessons droning on about fiendish creatures, see all the lines of their faces, the whiskers of beards and the sleekness of severe coiffures … but the words weren't coming to him.

Not demons—demons would have ripped him apart and been done. That was something.

"About 'Eater of Her Enemies' Livers,' " the girl said in an exasperated tone. "Is it pretentious or does it strike *fear* into the very core of your heart?"

"She's trying to name her glaive," the first devil explained. "Like in a story."

The second one peered at him. “Maybe I shouldn’t ask you. You look a little peaked.”

“Yes,” the first twin said. “So stop waving your glaive in his face, Havilar.”

“Eater of Her Enemies’ Livers,” the second corrected.

The first shrugged. She pulled a rag out of her haversack and handed it to her sister. “I liked ‘Kidney Carver’ better.” She took out a small leather roll and handed it to Brin. “If you want, you can use it.” Brin stared, dumbly. She unrolled it for him. It looked like a healer’s kit.

“Kidney Carver sounds common,” Havilar said. “Like some butcher’s cleaver.”

“Where’s Mehen?” the devil-girl said, still watching him.

“Cleaning up,” Havilar answered. “Why did you run out like that? He’s going to be furious.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Not now, Havi.”

“Yes now, *Farideh,*” Havilar said. “You ran out like you were going to start cutting all their heads off yourself. You never do that.”

Brin’s pulse was deafening. “To get me,” he said hoarsely. “You came out to … take me from the orcs.”

Farideh’s odd eyes settled back on him, and she nodded hesitantly. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you feeling better?”

Havilar bent down and looked at Brin. “You look pale. Are you sure he’s not dying?”

“Ignore her,” Farideh said. “You don’t seem to be bleeding anywhere, so it’s likely a little bit of shock. Which having a blade waved in your face doesn’t help.”

Havilar made a disgruntled little noise and pulled her glaive back. “Worrywart.”

“Show-off,” Farideh muttered.

“*I’m* the show off? You’re the one slinging magic all around like it was pebbles. What’s that thing? That thing with the fire?”

“A fire bolt.”

“You did a *fire bolt* on an *orc*. A *wounded* orc.” Havilar put a hand on her hip. “That is the very definition of a show-off. Mehen told

you to stay back."

"Says the girl who managed to work a little twirl into every one of her attacks. You know Mehen's going to tell you off for that."

"*Thrik-ukris*!" a man's voice bellowed, and both girls shut their mouths.

Striding toward them was the enormous scaled man—no, not a man. Brin remembered now: dragonborn.

He had seen dragonborn come to the temple of Torm once, and once before that in the markets of Suzail. They were fierce, disciplined fighters, new to the world of Faerûn—new, anyway, since the Blue Fire had remade things a hundred years ago. This far north, they were few and far between indeed.

"What in all the depths and heights of the planes around was *that*!" The dragonborn man's features were fearsome even though his movements were sure and calm. Like Havilar he was well fitted in scale armor over his own reddish scales, and along his jaw there were a series of holes, as if once he'd worn rings in that ridge.

He pointed a sharp-taloned finger at the first twin. "We had a plan. You leaped in there throwing fire like a street performer in front of fifty *karshoji* people, and then very nearly got yourself spitted on a *pothac* orc's bastard sword. What in the Hells were you thinking?"

Farideh's face contorted in anger. "Everyone can stop shouting at me, thanks. I was *thinking* they were going to kill him. Did you want me just to watch?"

She meant Brin. The orcs had been going to kill … He felt dizzy.

"If I hadn't done something," she continued, "then he'd be the one spitted on a sword."

"Axe," Havilar said blandly, scrutinizing her glaive. She looked down at him. "You can't spit things on an axe though. Split. You would have been *split* on that axe."

Brin turned and vomited on the ground beside him.

"Yes," the dragonborn said sarcastically. "I can see you've saved quite the precious soul. What *would* they have done without him?"

"I didn't get in your way," Farideh said. "It's not like they weren't going to be able to tell what we are anyway. You let Havilar out."

“Tieflings are one thing but warlo—” He broke off with a hissing sigh. “No,” the man said, “we can have this conversation later. When I lecture your sister for wasting her energy prancing around the battlefield like a godsdamned acrobat!”

“I killed seven of them!” Havilar protested.

“You killed *five,*” the dragonborn replied. “The two that limped off don’t count. And you could have taken nine.” He looked down at Brin, his eyes as cold and clear as a snake’s, but far more clever. “Are you done heaving all over the ground?”

“Y-yes,” Brin said.

The dragonborn reached beneath his breastplate and pulled out a much-folded, much-handled piece of paper. He smoothed it out and squatted down beside Brin so he could hold it close to his face. It smelled odd and musky, like dragonborn, concentrated. The page was a wanted poster—a picture of a sour-looking woman looked back at Brin. A pointed chin, a pinched nose. Dark, narrow eyes and darker hair with severe bangs. Brin’s heart started racing, and once more, he was afraid he was going to faint.

“You know her?” the dragonborn said. “You see her in that caravan?”

“No,” Brin said. He’d *not* seen her in the caravan, but he’d seen her nearly every day of his young life.

The woman was Constancia. Utterly, undoubtedly Constancia.

Of course Constancia had come looking for him—it was *her* head once someone realized he’d fled. Brin had counted on the fact that no one would send out hunters and wanted posters for *him*—too many had too much at stake for his name to become well-known. But if Constancia had ridden out after him, if she hadn’t gone to her superiors at the temple or their family, then …

The poster spoke volumes: Constancia was apostate for losing Brin.

The dragonborn stood, muttering under his breath in a language that wasn’t Common. “Farideh, Havilar—you two stay here. I’ll sort out things with the caravan master.” He pointed at each of them. “Don’t. Move.”

“Do you think they need help?” Farideh said.

“Don’t you go *near* them,” the dragonborn said. “You don’t know anything about them and now they know too much about you. Chances are better than good you’ll need your own help when one of them gets skittish and decides to stick you. Stay. Here.”

“They might like us better if we gave them our healing potions,” Havilar said.

“If they’re stupid enough to be traveling this road without their own supplies, then you don’t *want* them to like you. And they have a priest, so stop making up reasons to go over there.” He stomped off, muttering in the same language as before, toward the caravan and the priest—who had moved on from the bloody woman to a man with a head wound.

I should help, Brin thought, but his mind was racing with concern for his cousin and concern about the devils. What was he going to do?

“Don’t mind Mehen,” Farideh said. “He’s just annoyed we aren’t having better luck up here.”

“We’re bounty hunters,” Havilar chimed in. “Only we have the worst quarry these days. Mehen took her off another bounty hunter who’d given up. Fari’s sure we’ve gotten ahead of her. It’s like hunting a ghost. Except you can *lure* ghosts.”

“No you can’t,” Farideh said. “Who told you that?”

“*Everyone* knows that. You use whiskey. In a little plate.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

Brin blinked at them, the fog of the fight dissipating and the reality of what he was sitting amidst dawning. “You aren’t devils, are you?”

Both girls turned toward him. Farideh’s mouth went small and tight and her cheeks flamed. Havilar burst out with a snort of laughter that she quickly smothered.

“Yes,” she said, waggling the fingers of her free hand. “Devils. We’re bounty hunters of the Hells! Come to steal you away!”

“Stop it, Havi,” Farideh said. “It’s not funny.”

“Oooooooh!” she wailed, trying to stifle her giggles. “We’ll fry your innards and spit-roast your heart! Boil down your soul for …” She looked at Farideh. “What do they do with souls anyway?”

Farideh glared at her. “They draw power from them. We’re not devils,” she said to Brin. “Haven’t you ever seen a tiefling?”

“No,” he admitted, though now he felt foolish. What would devils be doing on Faerûn, chasing down errant novices like him? “I’ve … read about them. About you.”

Tieflings were the descendants of the unions between humans and fiends. While said union was many generations past, the taint of the devil’s blood bred true and all tieflings were cursed with strange, solid eyes; horns; and a tail. Many also had red skin, he had read, but the twins’ was fawn-colored—as ordinary as the Calishite priest and half the caravan in that regard. But their hair was such a black that it had a purplish cast, like a deep, day-old bruise … and their eyes …

He realized he’d been staring when Farideh said, rather delicately, “If you’d like to return to your family, we’d understand.”

“No,” Brin said. “I mean, they’re not my family, I don’t really know them. And I’m fine here. If that’s all right.” They weren’t devils. They were only girls. Girls who had saved him from marauding orcs. Orcs he had run from like a coward. He felt worse than sheepish.

Havilar and Farideh exchanged a glance, so quick he nearly missed it. “It’s all right. Is your leg any better?” Farideh said.

“Why are you traveling with them if you don’t know any of them?”

“Havi, hush. That’s none of our—”

“He doesn’t *have* to answer.” She looked at him. “You don’t *have* to answer.”

“They’re … it’s … It’s a refugee caravan,” he said after a moment. “But in reverse, I suppose. Returning to Neverwinter.”

“Neverwinter?” Farideh said. “I thought Neverwinter was destroyed ages ago.”

“It was. But they’re rebuilding it. And the Lord Neverember—well, he’s the one taking control of all the rebuilding and such—has called back the people who fled when Mount Hotenow erupted.”

Havilar looked at him askance. “Aren’t you a little young to have survived a catastrophe from thirty years ago?”

“Not me,” he said. “My parents. They fled and went to, um, Amn. I thought … I thought there would be something better for me in Neverwinter.”

Havilar squinted at him. “How old are you? Fifteen?”

“Seventeen,” he said hotly, forgetting to lie.

Havilar snorted. “You weigh as much as my glaive. What exactly do you think you’re going to be doing in Neverwinter?” she asked. “Not exactly fit for city-building. Also, your leg’s hurt.”

Brin scowled. He shifted to his feet and stood, gingerly applying weight to the leg. It bore him, even though it smarted. The axe handle hadn’t hit his knee. He could walk well enough until it could be healed.

“You’re still not about to clear a volcano’s remains,” Havilar said.

“It’s not all hauling stones and hammering posts,” Brin said. “Which I *could* do. It’s planning. And … constructing things. Opening stores. Making it a place worth staying in.” He dusted off his breeches. “It’s better than hunting criminals.”

Criminals. Constancia—Loyal Fury, it tore at him to think of casting her off to hunters like these. He wondered if Constancia rode with the holy champions. He wondered if it mattered against Havilar, quick and eager as she was with that glaive; stern Mehen; and Farideh with her magic. He’d never met a wizard who cast spells like that.

Sorcerer, he corrected himself. Wizards have books. Sorcerers just have magic.

Regardless, he owed Constancia. And now he owed these two—better they shouldn’t meet his cousin with her keen blade.

“If …” He hesitated deliberately. “Look, I haven’t seen your bounty, but if I were her and I were heading North … probably I’d go to Luskan.”

Havilar shook her head. “We do *not* want to go to Luskan.”

“It could be worse,” Farideh said, her eyes back on the cart behind them. “At least Luskan is the sort of place where no one cares what you look like.”

“It’s also the sort of place where you get stabbed in the night by *pirates* for no reason.”

“You’ve never even met someone who’s *been* to Luskan,” Farideh murmured. “You’re just repeating things you like the sound of.”

“Why are you such—”

Mehen returned then in a fouler temper than he’d left. After showing his leaflet to as many of the former refugees as would listen, he’d discovered that none of them had seen Constancia. Or at least, none would admit to it. And a fair number of them went out of their way not to talk to him at all.

“Brin says we should go to Luskan,” Havilar said.

Mehen scowled at Brin. “Did he? Which are you, boy, a thug or a hunter?”

“N-Neither?”

“Then I suppose I won’t be taking your advice,” he said. “Luskan can wait until we run out of options. *Nobody’s* going to help us in Luskan. It’s a Hellhole.”

See? Havilar mouthed to Brin.

Mehen looked up at her, then over her head, back at the caravan. “Farideh! Get back here! What in the Hells is wrong with you?”

Farideh was hurrying back from the lead cart, her cheeks scarlet. Brin hadn’t even seen her leave. The lead cart had been hit hard—the driver lay splayed across the seat with an arrow protruding from his ribs while his sister pressed a hand to the wound. Fortunately, she was also pouring a healing draft into his mouth.

Brin frowned.

The healing draft was in the same metal vial Farideh had been trying to press on him.

“Are you all right?” Mehen demanded.

“I’m *fine,*” she said. She turned rather deliberately away, to fuss with her haversack.

On the cart, the woman wrenched the arrow from her brother’s chest and he gasped. He sat up, wiping at the blood that slicked his skin, and breathing heavily—but breathing.

“Time to go,” Mehen said with a pointed look at Brin. He herded both twins ahead of him and down the road, without so much as a farewell. Both sisters glanced back once—Havilar with a jaunty

wave, Farideh with a more solemn look—and it was only moments before they were down the road, and out of sight.

Brin went back to the cart. The cart owner was still alive—though nursing a wounded arm—and so were his daughters, and Brin said a little prayer of thanks.

"Monsters," the man said, watching as the tieflings and the dragonborn headed down the road. "As if anyone with any sense would hand someone over to a pair of devil-children. One's a curiosity, two's a conspiracy. That and a dragonborn. Never know what those types are thinking."

"Yes," Brin said, shame in his chest. "Well."

He realized hadn't apologized for thinking they were devils. What had seemed like an honest mistake turned cruel and thoughtless when he heard the cart owner saying the same. He hadn't thanked them for saving him either, or for saving the rest of the caravan. Brin turned to help Tam with another man, a farmer with a broken arm, wishing for all the world he was traveling with a pair of devil-children and a dragonborn.

CHAPTER THREE

The House of Knowledge, Neverwinter

10 Kythorn, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

Patches of blue light scintillated along the right side of the sleeping man. The four acolytes arrayed around his cot could not seem to take their eyes off them, nor would they come closer than a few steps from the spellplague-touched man. Rohini pursed her lips.

"Come on," she coaxed, holding out the cotton bandages. "He doesn't bite."

"But …" one of the acolytes, a fair-haired human girl ventured. "Isn't he contagious?"

"If you are going to care for the victims of the Chasm," Rohini said, "you are going to have to firm up." She set the bandages on the table beside her and took up shears to cut the previous dressing loose. "You can't take on the guardsmen who fall in the river or take a tumble down a pile of rubble and leave all the interesting patients to your colleagues. Now, make certain you don't bind the dressing too tightly. He needs his blood still."

The acolytes eyed each other uneasily, still wary of the spellscar. Even in the sunlight streaming down from the many broken windows, the blue light was unmistakable. Rohini risked a glance through the archway and across the corridor. The door was still shut.

"Couldn't we just cast a healing on him?" a dark-skinned young man asked. "Isn't that why we're here? Because we have Oghma's blessing?"

“You are here,” Rohini said, a little more sternly, “to serve Oghma by assisting Brother Vartan’s studies of the Chasm. And to serve Neverwinter by taking care of her guardsmen.” She wound the clean bandage around the man’s arm. “Neither of which you do by wasting your god-given magic on a flesh wound.”

“But the spellplague—”

Rohini cut him off with a sharp look that held more than the promise of punishment, though she knew from experience that was all the human boy would see. “I trust, Josse, that you don’t believe you can heal the spellscarred when not even the god of knowledge has managed it?” The boy dropped his eyes.

Rohini’s eyes flicked back to the door. Still shut, but there was most definitely a stirring behind it, quiet and easy to dismiss … but more than she’d heard all morning.

“You are all very blessed,” she said, her voice light and sweet again. They all lifted their heads. They wanted to please her. “But you must learn these simpler skills and save your prayers for when they are needed. You will see wounds far more traumatic than this. Far more deadly. Infection. Disease. Poisons. If you have already worn yourself out casting healing magic on a scrape, then where shall you be?”

Definitely a stirring. Vartan’s guest was preparing to leave. She tied the dressing neatly closed, imagining for the barest moment what would happen to the wound if she *had* bound it good and tight—the sickening of the blood, the putrifying wound—and then locked that part of her mind away again. That wasn’t who Rohini was any longer.

“There,” she said. “Now the four of you take care of the rest. The bandages are here, and be certain your hands are clean.”

No sooner had she set them to their task but the door opened and two men came out. Brother Vartan—the head of the researchers and of the makeshift hospital the ancient temple to the god of knowledge housed—waved the shorter human through the door ahead of him. Rohini moved closer to the archway, making certain she did not seem obtrusive.

“I beg you to only consider—” Vartan began.

“We have considered,” the other man said. He met the half-elf priest’s impassioned expression with an equally dispassionate one, not bothering to wipe away the sweat that streamed down his temples and beaded his brow. His suit was damp with it. “We have no interest in what you offer. Anyone can study the Chasm. It brings my patrons no gain.”

“You were happy with Brother Anthus’s work,” Vartan said.

Very bad, Rohini thought. That was not a path to test. If Vartan pushed the representative of the Sovereignty too far, everything would be in jeopardy. She stepped into the corridor.

“Brother Vartan?” she said. The priest turned to her, as did the other man. Well dressed and haughty, Rohini thought, but he carried with him an odor not unlike a dockside at dusk—cold and wet and dank and vaguely fishy. A necessary evil, she thought, remembering her orders.

“Ah,” Vartan said, “Rohini. This is my second-in-command—as it were—Rohini. She was Brother Anthus’s assistant before his untimely death. Rohini this is—”

“That is not necessary,” the man said. His pale eyes bored into Rohini for a moment. She fought the urge to stare him down and made a polite curtsey.

“Well, nevertheless, I wish you good health,” she said, as if she did not notice the man’s consideration. “I must steal Vartan away from you, I’m afraid. I do hope your talks went well?” She toyed with a frizzy curl of her hair.

The man did not answer. Not for the first time, Rohini cursed that she did not quite know what she was dealing with in Vartan’s nameless, would-be patron. He might look like any other mortal, but looks could be deceiving. Tempting as it was to test his boundaries, she had been warned not to.

“Another time perhaps,” she said.

The man looked at Vartan. “Perhaps.”

“Yes,” Vartan said, giving Rohini a hard stare. “Another day. Farewell, sir.”

The sweating man turned and walked away down the corridor without responding.

“Things were improving,” Vartan said. “Why did you chase him off that way?”

“Because you were losing him,” Rohini answered. “What did you say? What did you promise him?”

“That isn’t your concern.”

“Your concerns are my concerns. What did you promise him?”

Vartan’s dark eyes flicked over her face, as if he were trying to remember why he felt the need to tell her. “Access to my findings,” he said. “Access to Anthus’s findings—the ones we know about.”

Rohini shut her eyes. Whatever secrets Anthus had recorded, the Sovereignty not only knew about them now—they knew he had recorded them.

“He ought to see the merit in my goals,” Vartan said, frowning in the direction the Sovereignty’s agent had taken. “In *our* goals,” he amended. “Who wouldn’t see the virtue in curing the effects of spellplague? In resurrecting the dead gods?”

“Oh, Vartan,” she said. She looked up at him, making sure her eyes were brown and soft. He always paid attention when they were brown and soft. She reached out and laid a hand on his forearm, where he’d rolled his sleeve up from the heat. The muscles beneath her hand twitched, but Vartan didn’t break his gaze.

“It’s important,” she said, “that you convince our friend there that you are worth his time. You are not going to do so unless you give him something that he wants.”

“Something that he wants?” Vartan said.

“Yes. And he isn’t going to tell you outright what that is, so you are going to have to tease it out of him.”

“Tease it out of him.”

“I’m well aware it’s not your strong suit,” Rohini continued. “But you want to do it. You want to find a way into the Sovereignty’s good graces. And soon. We both know that.”

“We do,” Vartan agreed.

Rohini stood and stepped in close. She pressed her mouth to the half-elf’s cheek, and with that kiss, wrapped his every thought with a trust for her so complete he would not realize she’d planted every word in his head.

He blinked, glanced around at the hallway, and blinked a few times more. “What … what were we …”

“Those sound like very clever plans,” Rohini said. “I only wish Brother Anthus were still with us, that he could assure us of their brilliance.”

Brother Anthus, Vartan’s predecessor, had been well ensconced in the Sovereignty’s good graces when Rohini first came to Neverwinter. Anthus never pressed Sovereignty’s proxy past his limits. Unfortunately, he’d made the mistake of pushing Rohini past *her* limits, which wasn’t a mistake anyone made twice.

She smiled sweetly at Brother Vartan. “I have to return to the acolytes.”

“Oh, of course,” he said. “But … we must have evenfeast later to discuss things. I shall be in the chapel in contemplation. Would you meet me there?”

Rohini smiled because she could not shudder. It might have been old and without a dedicated cleric, but the chapel was still hallowed ground. It would still be colder than a sword in a snowdrift in the heart of the Fifth Layer. It would still force her away.

“Certainly,” she said. “Until then.”

She watched Vartan walk away. She would simply have to find some task to engross herself in—caught up laboring over some poor spellscarred fool, perhaps. Or listening to an acolyte’s private heartbreak. She would pin her curls up, soft and loose, and find someplace where the sun’s low light would paint her in heartbreaking colors. That was the sort of follower Vartan wanted in her, romantic and feminine, traipsing after him with doting eyes and all the right, breathy questions. He would never think to ask why she hadn’t come to the chapel.

Rohini was so distracted by her planning that she walked into the wardroom without noticing the acolytes, and the succubus had only a moment to register that the young man who’d spoken earlier was disregarding her instructions and casting a healing spell.

Before she could stop him, his prayer was answered and traces of divine magic burst out in a scattered wind that bit into the succubus’s flesh like tiny icy needles.

The succubus flinched. Broken planes, but she hated acolytes.



The day had dragged on for so long, and the waybread Havilar had eaten a few hours before was nothing but a memory and an unpleasant taste in her mouth, but as the caravansary edged into sight, Havilar perked right up. A bed would be nice, dinner would be excellent, but most of all, Havilar was craving company. They were close enough now to hear the shouts of a wagon master and the whinny of horses. The sharp laughter of a woman rose above it and for a moment, Havilar imagined herself that woman—wild and carefree and striking to any eye—

"Havi!" Mehen barked. She looked over her shoulder to see Mehen watching her pointedly, and Farideh shaking out a wrinkled, hooded cloak. Havilar stopped cold.

"Tell me you're joking," she said.

"Put on your cloak," Mehen said.

"It's hotter than a campfire!"

"Put. On. Your. Cloak. You can take it off when we know what we're dealing with."

Farideh was wrestling her hood over her horns. Havilar gave her a pointed look. Mehen worried too much.

Farideh returned the look with a stern, wordless glare of her own, as if telling Havilar to put her damned cloak on.

Havilar scowled. Farideh worried too much too. At least between those two, Havilar figured, she didn't need to worry much at all. But she knew if she didn't follow suit, they'd never get to the caravansary—the two worrywarts would insist they sleep in the woods for "safety's sake." Away from anyone interesting.

"I think," Havilar said as they crossed the mostly empty courtyard, "we should spend some of the bounty on new cloaks. Pretty cloaks. Ones that don't look like tents. Or itch."

"Havi, put your hood up," Farideh said, "please?"

"No one's here," Havilar said. "They make them with ribbons and things, you know?"

Her sister's frown twitched into a smile. "Which would go so well with your glaive."

"It would if I put a ribbon on Eater of Her Enemies' Livers."

Farideh laughed, and Mehen scowled back at them as they reached the inn. "Havi, put your hood up."

The taproom of the inn wasn't terribly crowded, but it was early yet, hardly sundown. Havilar surveyed the occupants—a handful of men, each sitting alone and wrapped around their ales; a raucous group playing cards and not paying attention to anyone else; a couple old wagon masters leaning against the bar. More than a few were staring at the trio. None of them looked remotely worth talking to.

"*M'henish,*" Havilar muttered. Farideh squeezed her arm, and despite herself, Havilar's tail flicked nervously.

Mehen surveyed the room as well, looking for the bounty, no doubt. Havilar didn't bother to look—she was sure Farideh was right. They had passed the dark-haired woman.

Mehen steered them to an empty table in the corner of the room and then went to the bar to pay for supper and lodging. Perhaps half those staring found something else to look at, until Havilar pulled her hood back a little—and a dozen pairs of eyes honed in on her.

"Havi—"

Havilar waved her off. "It's too hot for that nonsense."

In the shadow of her hood, Farideh flushed, but she said nothing. Good, Havilar thought. Maybe she was calming herself a little bit. Maybe she was worrying less about what a lot of boring old men thought. Havilar was sure Farideh would crave some company, too, if only she stopped worrying so much. Being driven out of Arush Vayem was the best thing that had ever happened to them—or it would be if she and Farideh would start taking advantage of it.

Mehen came back with two full bowls of greasy dumplings and a thin stew of greens and gravy. "Havi, put your hood up."

"She's right," Farideh said. "It's ungodly hot." She looked down at the steaming bowls. "Especially if that's supper."

Mehen glowered down his snout at both of them. “The innkeeper says no food in the rooms. You have to eat down here, and that means you keep your cloaks on.”

“No one cares,” Havilar said, even though they were still getting a few curious looks.

“Stay here,” Mehen said. “Finish your suppers and go up to the room. Second room left of the stairwell. Then you may take off the cloaks.”

“Where are you going?” Farideh asked.

“To ask after our missing bounty,” he said as he walked away.

“*Karshoj,*” Farideh spat once Mehen was out of hearing. Havilar giggled—Farideh almost never swore—and got a dark look for it. “He’s being impossible lately,” Farideh said.

Havilar shrugged. “He’s being Mehen.” The doors opened and more people came in—more than a few caught sight of Havilar and stared. “I thought you two liked worrying together.”

Farideh picked up her spoon. “There’s a difference between being careful and not listening to reason.”

The dumplings were oily and heavily seasoned with onions, but they were hot and worlds better than old bread and dried meat. Havilar ate with one eye on the door and the people trickling in. These were a broader mix of sorts—younger, not-so-armed, looking around the taproom as if it were a novelty and not a fact of life.

Havilar elbowed Farideh. “Look. It’s that fellow you saved.”

The dark-haired boy lingered near the door, letting families and wagoneers go ahead. He looked tired, Havilar thought. Maybe that was why he didn’t look around or notice her and Farideh.

Farideh looked up and made a noncommittal noise. Havilar frowned at her, wondering not for the first time if there were something fundamentally wrong with her twin.

“What was his name again?” Havilar asked.

“Brin.”

Havilar nudged Farideh again with her elbow. “Go see if he wants to say thank you by eating with us.”

Farideh turned completely scarlet. “No.”

“Come on!”

“No!” She scraped the last of the gravy from her bowl. “Anyway, he seemed pretty happy to have us on our way.”

Now the boy was talking to the innkeeper who was shaking his head. The boy was getting flustered and arguing, but over the low din of the taproom, Havilar couldn’t hear about what. Maybe he didn’t want the dumplings.

“Let’s go,” Farideh said, standing. Much as she’d protested Mehen’s orders, she was still wearing the awful cloak.

Havilar stood. Finally, they were going to have some fun. “Where?”

Farideh pointed up the stairs. “Second door on the left, right?”

“Oh Fari, really?”

Farideh gave her another dark look, and headed upstairs. Havilar sighed heavily, picked up Eater of Her Enemies’ Livers, and followed. She looked sadly over at Brin as she passed—

And saw him pulling a half-empty bottle of liquor over the counter and shoving it inside his jerkin. He glanced around and spotted her watching. Havilar smiled, but he turned away and sped out through the door.

“*M’henish,*” she muttered and headed upstairs.

The room wasn’t very big, but the bed was wide enough for the two of them, and there was space for Mehen on the floor and a table and chairs besides. A pitcher of water and a basin for washing rested on a stand and a small fireplace lay cold behind an iron screen. Farideh had pushed open the windows and sat in one of the chairs to catch the breeze. Havilar pulled off her cloak and tossed it across Farideh’s, already lying on the bed.

“I wish,” Farideh said after a moment of quiet, “you’d be a little less obvious. Don’t you think at all about what might happen? About what people might be thinking?”

Havilar sat in the other chair. “Why should I?”

“Do you know how long it takes for someone to make up their mind about you?” Farideh asked. “About anyone? Seconds. You don’t even have to open your mouth and they’ve already made their minds up. If you’re lucky you can change their minds, but … you’re a tiefling. It’s harder than it is for most.”

“Me?” Havilar said. “I’m delightful. Everyone knows that. Or everyone should.”

Farideh sighed. “I’m only saying be more careful—”

“You be more careful, you’re the responsible one.”

“Hardly,” Farideh said. “Mehen doesn’t trust me to do anything.”

“Because,” Havilar said, “you’re too careful. Anyway, who cares about Mehen? Careful doesn’t work with boys.”

“How would you know?”

“I’ve talked to boys.”

“When?”

“Before,” Havilar said. “At home.”

“There were four fellows within a dozen years of us,” Farideh said. “Which one did you prove your theory on?”

“Well you did with Iannis,” Havilar retorted. “Pretty clear careful doesn’t work with him.”

Farideh’s cheeks reddened and she looked away at the mention of the dairyman’s stupid son. Havilar rolled her eyes—her sister had been infatuated with one boy so far as she knew, and Farideh was still sulking over it. All the more reason to get her out of this boring room.

“Come on,” Havilar cajoled. “We’ll just slip out for a bit.”

“No. You don’t know who’s out there.”

“Aren’t you bored of having no one but Mehen to talk to?”

Farideh frowned and rubbed her arm. “I have you.”

“Of course you have me. That’s always going to be true. But when was the last time we spent *any* time with anybody who wasn’t a hundred years old? And don’t say Lorcan,” she added. “Lorcan doesn’t count.”

“Of course he doesn’t count,” Farideh said. “Lorcan could be a hundred years old for all I know.” She rubbed her arm again.

Havilar frowned. “That’s not what I mean.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re talking about boys. Not Lorcan,” she added.

“He doesn’t count because he only talks to you,” Havilar said. “You think he’d have two words to say to me, since I brought him here and everything, but no.”

“Havi, you don’t want to talk to Lorcan,” Farideh said. Her hand gripped her upper arm tightly now, and Havilar glared at it. “Trust me.”

“Of course you say that,” Havilar said. “What do you tell him about me?”

“I don’t,” Farideh said. “We don’t talk about you. Havi, it’s not personal. It’s Lorcan. You don’t want him to notice you—I promise.”

“You want him to notice you.”

Farideh’s cheeks flushed again. “No, I don’t!”

“Then why are you always going off to talk to him? What are you doing? Calling him down when you get sick of us? You don’t even know him.”

Judging by Farideh’s startled expression, she’d thought it was a secret—which only made Havilar more annoyed. “It’s not like that,” Farideh said tightly. Then, “Has Mehen noticed?”

“After today? Probably. Even he’s not that dense.”

Farideh was quiet. “Havi, please,” she finally said. “It’s not because I’m sick of you. He’s just … He agreed not to turn up when people were around. So I have to be somewhere else to talk to him. It’s not about you,” she added. “Only about … spells. And things.”

Things which she didn’t bother to include Havilar in. Havilar turned and studied the open window, churning with unpleasant feelings she didn’t want to think about. Fine. If Farideh wanted to stay hidden up in the room, staring at the empty fireplace instead of going on a little adventure with her sister, Havilar wasn’t about to sit around with her. If she got bored, she could talk to stupid Lorcan.

“I’m getting Brin,” she announced. “Or whatever his name was.”

“No,” Farideh said. “Mehen told us to stay here.

“And he told you to stop talking to Lorcan,” Havilar said. “Who cares what Mehen says? I’m going out the window anyway. He won’t see.”

“Havi, please. I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Farideh said. “Please. Stay. Don’t leave.”

“I’ll only be a moment,” Havilar said. She wasn’t going to be the careful one, the boring one. She threw one leg over the sill. “And if

I'm not, you can tell me you were right. Until morning."

"Havi, it's not—" she started, but Havilar was out of earshot, sliding down the edge of the roof and off into the night.

Brin found a spot behind an empty wagon where some crates had been stacked, and made himself a little nook between two. He shook the bottle until the whiskey swirled around in a whirlpool that collapsed with a brief, frothy splash. What in the world was he going to do with half a bottle of whiskey? What had he thought the tavernmaster would do *without* half a bottle of whiskey?

He'd been so angry when the tavernmaster refused to rent him a space on the floor for anything less than three pieces of gold. And after giving a full room to the man in front of him for the same price. The tavernmaster hadn't even the manners to be embarrassed at being caught in such a swindle—he only shrugged and turned away from Brin, as if he were no one important.

Which I'm not, Brin reminded himself glumly. In a fit of pique he'd snatched up the closest thing he could reach: the half-empty bottle of whiskey.

He put the bottle to his lips and wet his mouth. Sharp as broken glass on the tip of his tongue and bitter with the taste of a bad barrel. Not very good, but not likely to kill him. Human-style whiskey, but a strong, unwatered sort Brin could imagine being favored by the sort of people who lived along this rugged road, tolerable to the dwarves and orcs that passed through, and not bad for cleaning wounds. Or maybe spoons.

He was never going to finish half a bottle.

Not even by trying to slow his thoughts down enough to figure out what to do about Constancia. The tieflings and the dragonborn were here—the dragonborn was still asking around about Brin's cousin in the courtyard. He shouldn't have expected to dissuade them—this was their livelihood after all, and he was nobody. Even if he used every trick he knew, he might—*might*—be able to convince the twins not to go after Constancia. They *might* in turn be

able to talk Mehen out of it. There was a chance slimmer than a silk strand that Constancia could be protected.

And then she would still be free to chase Brin to Returned Abeir and back again. He took another careful sip of the whiskey.

What was he trying to protect her from anyway? Being locked in a room and questioned for hours? That was likely to happen anyway, and it wasn't much worse than he'd had things before. Her superiors weren't monstrous. They knew he was troublesome. They couldn't ultimately blame her, he decided, taking another sip of whiskey. They wouldn't do anything worse than Constancia would if she caught Brin.

What he needed, Brin thought, was a sort of buffer. Like a layer of armor between him and Constancia. When she found him—as he had to admit she inevitably would—if there were someone to slow her down … something to trip her up …

Someone like a bounty hunter, who would give Brin a head start by conveying her to the nearest Temple of Torm.

Brin looked down at the stolen whiskey bottle. "Loyal Fury, forgive me," he muttered, even though he knew his contrition probably didn't much sway the god of duty. Especially when he wasn't giving the whiskey back.

The tiefling girl with the glaive and the golden eyes—Havilar, he thought—had seen him in the bar. She'd seen him stealing the whiskey and smiled at him, like it was funny. Like she knew something about him now. He wondered if she'd tell the tavernkeeper. He wondered if the tavernkeeper would listen.

He wondered if the smile was a good thing. If it meant she might be the one to help him with Constancia. After all, he thought, a quarry you had to handle gently was better than no quarry at all.

But then he thought of Mehen, who was clearly in charge. No—it would have to be Mehen he convinced. Somehow. He swirled the whiskey around in the bottle again, lost for answers. He couldn't imagine how to even begin guessing what a dragonborn was thinking.

Someone moved in the shadows outside Brin's hiding place. He shifted just enough to see Tam, the Selûnite priest, stepping very

deliberately out of the torchlight that washed the courtyard and behind a wagon. He searched around the wagons and the crates in a cursory, distracted sort of way—thankfully missing Brin—then dropped down to kneel upon the cobbles.

Tam withdrew a trio of vials from his pack and flicked the corks out of each. He muttered a chain of words under his breath and poured the powders in tidy, practiced lines. Brin leaned a little farther out—it was a ritual, no doubt. Those were salts of copper. That, some powdered metal … the last was dark and rusty, and made Brin think of dried blood. Tam's eyes glazed slightly and before he spoke, Brin was sure: Tam was performing a sending.

"Fisher: the caravan too slow," Tam said to someone who might be on the other side of Toril for all Brin knew. "Hiring swords for the remainder of the journey—two days, if I can avoid more orcs. Advise Cymril. Expecting reimbursement."

Silence hung in the shadowy corner for only a moment before another voice spoke.

"Shepherd: Message received. Will see about reimbursement. But Harpers not so rich as Viridi. Don't bother Cymril. Report in at the first sign of lycanthropes or—"

The voice cut off, and Tam cursed. He stood and kicked the pattern of powders into the dust, muttering to himself. "Twenty-five stlarning words, Fisher. It's always been twenty-five stlarning words."

Harpers. Brin wet his lips on the whiskey again, despite wanting a full gulp of the stuff. He wasn't just a priest. He was a spy.

A virtuous spy—relatively. Harpers served no government, and it was widely believed one had in fact assassinated the king of Tethyr ages ago. It was also widely believed the organization had collapsed not long after. Brin thought about what the disembodied voice had said—"Harpers not so rich as Viridi." So Tam hadn't always spied for the Harpers, then. New enough to be unsure about protocols, old-hand enough to demand what he wanted. Interesting.

Tam looked out across the courtyard, scanning the wagons and crowds as if looking for someone, but not venturing from their

shared hiding spot. Brin frowned—how long was the priest going to be? Brin needed to find the dragonborn and—

Brin cursed. There was Mehen, storming past the gap between the two wagons, fearsome-looking as ever. Brin couldn't very well spring past Tam and not expect trouble.

But then Torm or Selûne or Lady Luck, Tymora herself, smiled down, and Tam's hand shot out and grabbed the dragonborn's thick upper arm.

"Hold, friend."

Mehen turned and bared his yellow teeth. "What do you want?"

Tam smiled, at perfect ease. "Well met to you as well." He held out a hand. "The name is Tam."

Mehen ignored the hand. "Mehen."

Tam frowned, looking surprised at that, and Brin wished he knew why. Mehen stared the priest down.

"You're the one who saved the caravan earlier. You and the tieflings."

"We did what we could."

"You turned the tide," Tam said. "I, for one, am grateful for that. Are you heading to Neverwinter?"

Mehen shrugged. "North. We're tracking someone."

"Through Neverwinter at least?" When Mehen gave another shrug, he added, "I'll not lie to you, I'm looking for a few extra swords."

"We're not traveling with your caravan, priest."

Tam smiled. "It's not my caravan, and I don't belong to it any longer. I need to get to the city more quickly than they can travel. I don't dare go on my own. I was hoping I might hire your services."

Mehen folded his arms across his chest. "You hire me, you hire my girls."

"The tieflings?"

"The same. So I put that to you, priest: are you certain you wish to travel with a pair of 'devil-children' and a godless dragonborn?"

"Depends on what you're charging," Tam said. "If you think you'll shock me with tieflings and unbelievers, I've seen things that are

much stranger and much worse. I'll give you two gold pieces for an escort to Neverwinter."

Mehen scratched his empty piercings. He'd be a fool not to take it, Brin thought. Two gold for an escort to a place he was traveling near anyway, why not? Two gold for taking on another weapon, really.

Brin thought of the way the priest had waded into the fray, that chain slashing through the air with grim accuracy. It would make more sense for Mehen to pay Tam.

"On one condition," Mehen warned. "You leave my girls alone. You so much as frighten them and—"

"None of that," Tam said gently. "I'm no young idiot full of spleen and holy fire. You and I are more of a kind than I am to that sort. My days of fervent conversion are long past, and my soul is old enough to have more stains on it than your charges'. At least, consider it."

Mehen was silent a long moment. "I'll consider it."

"In the morning then," Tam said. They shook hands once more, and Mehen made his way back across the courtyard to question another group of travelers that had just rolled in.

Perfect, Brin thought. So perfect he thanked every god he could think of and swore he'd leave offerings in as many temples as he could find. He struggled to his feet, shoved the whiskey bottle in his haversack and stepped out, just as Tam was hoisting his own bag to his shoulder.

"Well met. Harper Tam," he added with a little pleasure.

Tam started and stared at Brin. "Well," he said, after a moment. "The piper who's no piper. You're a quiet one, aren't you?"

"Quiet enough," Brin said. "Do you think Mehen will like the fact you're not only a priest, but a spy?"

"To be honest?" Tam said. "I don't think he'll know what a Harper is."

"That's all the worse though. He's definitely the sort to assume if he doesn't know it, it's probably something bad, don't you think?"

"Probably," Tam said mildly. "I'd rather he didn't think about it at all. You're rather good at reading people, aren't you? Did they

teach you that in Cormyr?"

Brin tried to affect the same cool mildness, but inside he was cursing. What had given him away? "Of course," he said. "It's practically a requirement for citizenship."

"Let's cut to the quick of it—what were you calling yourself? Brin?" Tam folded his arms. "You want something. Tell me and we'll see what needs to be done. Less entertaining, I'm sure, than the way they do things in Suzail … but you're a long way from home, aren't you?"

Brin's bravado collapsed. For the first time, it occurred to Brin that the priest was dangerous. That he did not know where the rules of a silverstar and a Harper lay when it came to lads with sharp tongues threatening their cover.

"I … I need to travel with the dragonborn too," he said. "I want you to tell him I'm traveling with you. That I need to come along."

Tam frowned, his dark eyes searching Brin's face as if what he wasn't saying would be written there. Brin nearly told him too … but without knowing what the priest would or would not do, it was too dangerous. In some people's eyes, Brin would be nothing but a boy in the midst of some mischief. In others', he would be a traitor.

A slow, crooked smile crept across Tam's mouth. "Oh. I see. Out with it then, which one of them is it?"

Brin's heart started to gallop. Tam couldn't have heard his thoughts. "I don't know what you mean."

Tam chuckled. "It's all right. I won't say anything. But let me give you a little advice: make up your mind before we leave. You don't want to leave two girls wondering, especially when you're traveling together. More especially if they're sisters."

"Oh!" Brin made himself look away, as if he were embarrassed, and pursed his lips hard, so he wouldn't grin. The priest thought this was about Brin mooning over those tiefling girls. Blessed, blessed gods—this was perfect. *Anything* odd could be blamed on that. He was almost ashamed he hadn't thought of it himself.

"You won't tell them, will you?" he said.

“No,” Tam replied. “So long as you don’t discuss what you’ve heard. They’re only a part of my plans so far as I need extra blades to make it through Neverwinter Wood.”

“Then I will see you tomorrow morning,” Brin said.

He walked back out into the courtyard, winding his way around wagons and bedrolls and pickets of horses. Everything was going to be all right. Mehen would keep Constancia from catching Brin. Tam would get where he was going and never look too closely at Brin. Now he just had to find somewhere to sleep and not get trampled.

He took the whiskey bottle out for another tentative, celebratory sip, when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He swallowed wrong. The alcohol burned his throat and lungs, and he coughed hard enough to make his eyes water.

“Oh good gods,” a female voice said. “Are you still all jumpy? Because I’m not going to invite you anywhere if you’re going to throw up again.”

Brin blinked away the tears and spun on his assailant. It was the leggy tiefling girl with the glaive. Havilar. Only the glaive was somewhere else. She stood there, just out of the torchlight, with her hands behind her back and the tip of her tail slashing back and forth. Brin didn’t know what that meant. Whether it was Tam’s insinuations or the fact that—this time—he wasn’t trying not to throw up, Brin had to admit she was a little pretty.

“Well met,” she said with a nice smile. She pointed at the whiskey bottle with her chin. “Do you want some help finishing that?”

CHAPTER FOUR

The High Road, two days south of Neverwinter

10 Kythorn, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

Farideh listened to her breath, too fast and too shallow. There was only a moment to consider leaping out after Havilar—to consider if she even *wanted* to leap out after Havilar—before Lorcan appeared. The portal made no noise, but the air stirred as he took up space that was once empty, and it brushed hot against the back of her neck.

Whatever else was true of Farideh, she knew Mehen was right: Lorcan was dangerous. She should have rejected his advances. She should have told him where to go when he showed up at their camp in the middle of winter. She should have turned him away every time he came after that. Lorcan was a bastard and a devil, and devils were nothing but trouble. She knew that.

But even though she knew enough to dread Lorcan's arrival, at the same time an unmistakable gladness went through her when the portal opened—a gladness she knew better than to tell a soul about. Especially Lorcan.

"Come now, my darling," Lorcan said from behind her. "Am I so much more frightening than the night and a caravansary full of strangers?"

Farideh kept staring out the window at the torchlights along the courtyard. "Who said I was frightened?"

"Then you just want your sister to join us?" She turned and saw him smirking down at her. "Sorry, darling, you'll have to break it to her gently; you're the only one for me."

Farideh felt her cheeks burn. "You shouldn't be here. What if Mehen comes back?"

“Well,” Lorcan said, still entirely too close, “at some point you’re going to have to stop worrying about what your lizard thinks.” She didn’t move as he paced around her. “Maybe tonight’s the night. We can all agree I was right about your little scuffle before.” His voice was suddenly much closer to her ear. “You were magnificent … despite Mehen’s best efforts.”

“Would you have said the same if that priest had caught me?”

“I won’t let anyone catch you, darling. Be as bold as you like.”

She watched the door as if her gaze was the only thing keeping it shut. “Mehen thinks you sent the orcs.”

Lorcan chuckled. “And what on all the planes would I be doing with *orcs*? He does know you’re only a tenday’s ride from their kingdom of Many-Arrows?”

“Why are you here?”

“I thought,” he said, reaching an arm around her, “you might like a new spell.” He opened his right hand, and she felt the rush of Hellish powers through him, through her. His palm flickered with a dull yellow light. “You certainly proved you can handle what you have against those orcs.”

Farideh stared at the dancing light. It was dangerous. Too dangerous. Every one of these spells was a step farther down the path that surely doomed her.

“What does it do?”

In answer, Lorcan took her left hand in his and the dull light coalesced in her own palm. A thread of power wound its way through her arm. He aimed her fingers toward a piece of firewood sitting beside the hearth. “*Assulam.*”

“*Assulam,*” Farideh repeated.

The light flashed and in the same moment, the wood exploded. Lorcan’s wing cut across her vision to shield her, and when he drew it away, she saw a fine scattering of splinters littered the floor. There was nothing else left of the firewood.

“Don’t try it on anything too large,” Lorcan said. “Or living. It’s not that sort of spell.”

Farideh watched the last fleeting motes of the spell crackling across her palm. “What do I use it for?”

“You’ll think of something,” he said, drawing a finger down her wrist. “You’re clever.” He slipped around her and she stepped back.

Farideh glanced at the door again. Havilar had to be back any moment. Mehen wouldn’t be long. Anyone who heard the crash of the spell.

Lorcan’s eyes flicked in the same direction, following her glance no doubt, and he raised an eyebrow. “Expecting someone?” He shifted toward her and this time, she held her ground and tried not to notice the way he smirked as she did. Sometimes it felt as if he were herding her, driving her this way and that like she were a frightened sheep.

“No. Only Havilar. And Mehen. And I do care,” she added, “what he thinks.” Lorcan’s eyes narrowed. “You promised,” she said.

“ ‘Never in front of Mehen,’ ” he said. “And I keep my word.” He moved away from her so swiftly she was momentarily afraid he was going to walk out the door and through the taproom.

But instead he threw the bolt.

“There. Problem solved.”

She swallowed, her tail flicking nervously back and forth. “Mehen *will* be back—”

“And you’ll tell him you locked it for safety: the night, the strangers, and such.” He closed on her, and Farideh was all too aware of the feeling of seams coming loose inside her. “You’re not as lamb-brained as he likes to pretend you are.”

“Mehen doesn’t think I’m stupid,” she said.

“Just that you can’t make your own decisions.” Lorcan didn’t stop, and she took a step back. She came up against the windowsill. “You know I’m right.”

“You’re always right,” Farideh said, a little sharply.

You want him to notice you, Havilar had said, and looking into those black eyes again, Farideh had a hard time insisting she was wrong. She knew better—she did—than to trust him. But she kept on trusting him anyway, and he kept giving her reasons to.

Watching her, he seemed to be enjoying the fact that she couldn’t move with him standing so close. The fact that she was staring at his mouth again.

You want him to notice you. You don't even know him.

Farideh wet her lips. "How … how old are you?"

Lorcan drew back, startled. "What?"

"How old are you?" Farideh asked. "Havilar and I were talking and … I realized I don't know. You never told me."

He stared at her a moment more. "Of course I didn't. It's irrelevant. I don't keep track of that sort of thing."

"You don't *know* how old you are?"

"No," he said tetchily. "And I don't see why you care."

"It was just a question. How is it you—"

The sound of the portal reopening startled Lorcan far more than Farideh. He stepped between her and the portal, one wing half-curled around her. Farideh peered over his shoulder.

A second cambion—a woman with her head shaved bald and silvery lines tattooed over her scalp and around the delicately pointed horns protruding from her forehead—stood in the fading light of the portal, her hands on her hips. Her eyes were golden, like Havilar's, but they glowed with an otherworldly light, and the lashes that fringed them were silver and sharp as needles. The twist of her pretty mouth and the arch of her eyebrows were decidedly mocking.

"Sairché?" Lorcan said, sounding more surprised than Farideh had ever heard him. Unbidden, jealousy twisted Farideh's stomach, and her tail started to flick back and forth.

"So, this is where you've been running off to," the cambion said.

"What are you doing here?" Lorcan asked.

She smiled. "Finding out why Mother's artifact is activated. Does she know you're playing with the Needle of the Crossroads to conduct your little trysts?" She glanced around the room. "You're going to get mites in a place like this."

Farideh blushed to her temples. "No, it's not—"

Lorcan grabbed her wrist hard and she shut her mouth.

"It's not your business," he said slowly. "And it's not Mother's either."

A mother. He'd mentioned her before: Invadiah, the fiercest erinyes, he'd said. But for some reason putting the word "mother"

to Lorcan seemed absurd and wrong. Farideh held perfectly still, not wanting to pull against Lorcan's crushing grip and make things worse.

Sairché shook her head, as if poor Lorcan really had no idea what trouble he was in. "That's between you and her. Of course." Her golden eyes lit on Farideh. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your little paramour?"

Lorcan squeezed Farideh's wrist harder. "Not now."

"Right," the cambion drawled. "Come find me when you're finished." To Farideh she added, "He's nobody, you know? Don't let him sell you some line about 'inciting fiendish passions.' " When Farideh blushed harder, Sairché chuckled. She lifted the chain she wore around her neck—one strung with a dozen rings—and slipped the small green one on her finger. Soft as an eye blink, she vanished.

Lorcan had gone as tense as a man holding a hornet's nest. He watched the spot where Sairché had stood for taut moments, still gripping Farideh's wrist tightly enough to make her hand throb.

"Lorcan," Farideh said. "Who was that?"

He spun on her, jerking her a step closer. His eyes blazed and the air between them grew scorching hot, as if Lorcan were about to burst into flame and burn her to ashes with him.

No, she thought, narrowing her eyes. It would take a lot more for either of us to burn up.

Lorcan sneered and released her, all but throwing her arm aside, and the threat of fire dampened. He turned back to glare at the spot where the other cambion—his lover? His rival? His other warlock? —had stood.

She'd said *mother*, Farideh thought Not *your mother*.

"She's your sister," Farideh said, and it was as odd a word as *mother* to put to Lorcan.

"One of far too many," Lorcan said.

"You weren't expecting her."

"Of course I wasn't," he snapped, still staring at the spot. "She shouldn't have followed me." He turned back to Farideh, still

agitated. “Has anyone else bothered you? Has anyone been asking about me?”

“Not a soul.”

“Or a devil?”

“No one. What’s going on?”

Lorcan ignored her. “Has anyone asked you about your powers?”

“No,” Farideh said. If anyone had, she wouldn’t have explained them. Lorcan might not care who knew—or he hadn’t, she thought, until Sairché appeared—but aside from Havilar and Mehen, she’d never wanted to tell anyone. It was too risky.

He frowned at the missing portal. “She shouldn’t bother you again,” he said after a moment. He sounded more like he was convincing himself.

“Why did you let her think we were …?” Farideh trailed off, too embarrassed to finish.

Lorcan’s smirk returned, and whatever was troubling him was gone, hidden away again. “Everyone needs a hobby. Sairché’s is secrets.” Lorcan brushed her hair back and whispered in her ear, “She especially likes knowing things before other people do.”

Quick as an adder, Lorcan twisted the green ring he always wore. Another faint rush of air and he slid between the planes and out of Farideh’s reach. She kept her fists balled anyway, until the portal shut.

Farideh would never once, not in a million years, admit to Lorcan the effect he had on her—though it probably didn’t matter. He undoubtedly knew. He didn’t say what he said or do what he did because he wanted her affection.

She especially likes knowing things before other people do—he didn’t mean a thing by that. He didn’t mean he meant to…. She blushed again. Havilar was right; she thought too much.

She wondered if she’d enjoy it …

Gods, she thought. She sat back down, and pressed her hands to her face as if she could hide from that thought. She knew better than to fall into Lorcan’s pretty words. Some other tiefling might be foolish enough to think that because he touched her face and called

her darling it meant anything at all. Lorcan was a bastard and a devil, and devils didn't love.

And yet, she'd been jealous of Sairché. Only for a moment, but still. Jealous that she knew Lorcan as intimately as she did, jealous that Lorcan didn't want her to know about Farideh and didn't care if Farideh knew about her, jealous that Sairché looked so confident and powerful—there was no changing that she'd felt it. But gods, Farideh could slap herself, she was so annoyed that she'd been jealous. She was being silly to think for even a moment about Lorcan as if he were any other boy, any other man—but the idea that she could stop him in his tracks the way Sairché had … that was harder to feel silly about.

A grunt and the frenzied sound of hands scrabbling at roof tiles made her look up. One pale hand clutched at the sill.

"Fari!" Havilar hissed from beyond. "Come help before someone hears!"

"Gods," Farideh muttered, but she went to the window.

The boy from the caravan clung to the window frame, looking up at her as if seriously reconsidering whatever her sister had said to convince him to scramble halfway up the slippery shakes of the roof, braced only by Havilar, who in turn braced herself against the gutter by one heel.

"What happened to 'no one will see me'?" Farideh hissed, taking hold of the boy's arm and hauling him in. Havilar scrambled up after him and grabbed ahold of her sister's hand.

"Nobody did see," she said. She clambered over the sill and glanced back into the darkness. "But maybe he should leave by the door. I nearly broke my neck on the way out." She grinned at Farideh. "Did you see my landing? It … was …"

She trailed off, sniffing. The hot and bitter scent of the portal opening still laced the air, faint but unavoidable. Havilar's expression grew concerned. Farideh glared at her. After all of Havilar's complaints, Lorcan had come because she had left.

Havilar rolled her eyes, as if to say to the Hells with Lorcan anyway. Farideh glanced over at the boy. If he smelled the traces of Lorcan's portal …

He was looking around the room, as if he didn't want to let his eyes settle. He looked at the walls, the locked door, the bed, the floor, the cold fireplace, and finally, to Farideh.

"Is everything all right?" he said. "You … Did you not want me to come? Havilar said—"

"No," Farideh said, "it's not that. I just didn't want Havilar to go out."

"Well now we're in!" Havilar said.

"And Mehen is going to come back eventually. What do you think he's going to say when he finds out you snuck a boy in here?"

"Brin," the boy said. "And Mehen didn't see." He looked at Havilar. "Should I call him Mehen? Or is it Goodman Something?"

Havilar giggled. "Just Mehen. He doesn't have a clan name."

"It's not funny," Farideh said, more sternly than she meant to. "It's better if no one knows there's a pair of tieflings rooming here."

"Just everyone who saw us in the taproom," Havilar said sarcastically. She sat down on the floor and pulled Farideh down beside her. "Brin, give her some whiskey before she has a fit."

Brin sat down beside them, drawing a half-empty bottle of brown liquor out of his pack. Farideh frowned.

"Where did you get that?"

"Downstairs."

"The tavernmaster sold you a half-bottle of whiskey?"

"No," Brin said. "He tried to charge me an arm and a leg for space on the tavern floor. I thought it was fair to even things out a bit."

"You stole it?"

"It was mutual stealing," Havilar explained. "Like how you can kill someone if they're trying to kill you."

"All right, it sounds stupid," Brin said hotly. "But it was the only thing I could reach." He looked at Farideh, puzzled. "Are you feeling all right? Your cheeks are all red."

"I'm fine," she said automatically. She pressed a hand to her face. "Just … harder to pull you in than I thought."

At least having some refugee boy in the room was better than Mehen finding her with Lorcan. If he came in now, it would be Havilar's fault too.

Havilar grinned madly at Brin, as if she'd caught a particularly tricky beast in one of her traps. "You didn't think I'd manage, did you?" she said to Farideh.

"I was hoping you wouldn't."

Havilar looked past her and frowned. "Why did you bolt the door?"

To herself, Farideh cursed. "Safety." She hurried to the door and undid the bolt, without meeting Havilar's eyes.

You're still just frustrated at Lorcan, she thought. You can't take that out on Havi. Or Brin.

Brin yanked the cork free and paused, staring at the open bottle. "I never said thank you." He looked up at Farideh. "For saving me. And … I should apologize too. To both of you. I wasn't in my right mind, I suppose. But it still was terribly rude to assume you were devils. Even if you had been … you did me a good turn."

Farideh relaxed a little. Maybe Havilar was right. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. Maybe it would be normal.

"I don't have any glasses," Brin said apologetically. "I hope that's all right."

"Brin, we live on the *road,*" Havilar said. "We're used to not drinking out of glasses."

"Oh. Right," he said, taking out a handkerchief to wipe the mouth of the bottle. "And I suppose Mehen doesn't stand on etiquette."

Havilar snorted. "Gods, can you imagine Mehen teaching us how to curtsey and take tea? 'Put your damn back straight,' " she bellowed. " 'You curtsey from the hip not the knee! You're leaving yourself wide open for a snub from the queen of Tethyr.' "

Farideh giggled. " 'No, no, no!' " she growled back. " '*M'henish*, how many times do I have to tell you, pass the biscuits with your off-hand so you can parry the zzar with your stronger arm!' " Havilar laughed so hard she pounded the floor.

Brin took a sip from the whiskey bottle. "How long have you been traveling with him?"

"Forever," Havilar took the whiskey bottle from him. "He adopted us. He's our father."

That took Brin a moment to absorb. “But,” he finally said, “you call him ‘Mehen.’ Not ‘Father’?”

“Dragonborn call their parents by name,” Farideh said.

“What happened to your real parents?” Brin said, and Farideh felt a surge of irritation. Mehen was a real parent, more so than whoever had left them behind, but she bit her tongue. She knew what he meant even if she didn’t like the way he said it.

Havilar shrugged. “Someone left us at the village gates.”

“And there wasn’t … a note? Or a clue in the blankets?”

Farideh and Havilar glanced at each other. Arush Vayem was the sort of place people went to hide from their pasts, to start over right when that wasn’t possible in other lands. They both knew if someone had left a pair of babies at the gates of Arush Vayem, there was no need of a message to say that they didn’t want the twins back.

“It’s not a story, Brin,” Farideh said. She sipped the whiskey. It tasted sharp and woody and the burn of the alcohol tickled her throat. “We’re not the secret princesses of Abeir or something.”

“Where are *your* parents?” Havilar asked.

“Oh,” Brin said vaguely. “Off somewhere. They’re … adventurers, you know?” He glanced up at them a moment, as if he were weighing something against their expressions, and Farideh wondered what it was. “They go away for years and so I ended up in a strict Tormish school.” He took a careful sip of whiskey. “I … I left. I’m not cut out to be Tormish.”

Havilar snorted. “I’ll say. Tormites don’t steal whiskey.”

“They do *buy* it,” Brin said. “A look of discomfort passed over his features and was gone. “Where’s your village?”

“Near Tymanther,” Farideh said. “In the Smoking Mountains.”

“You won’t have heard of it,” Havilar said. “It’s a secret village.”

Farideh sighed. “Havi.”

“What?” Havilar said. She took a sip of the whiskey. “Who is he going to tell?” She turned back to Brin. “It’s just a village of people who don’t want to be found.” Farideh stopped herself from sighing again.

“You mean criminals?” Brin asked, excitement creeping into his voice.

“She means outcasts,” Farideh said, passing the bottle back to him. “It’s just a village of people who … didn’t belong somewhere else.”

“Lots of dragonborn,” Havilar said. “It seems like it’s rather easy to get cast out of a clan, if you ask me. And humans who didn’t fit in somewhere.”

“And tieflings,” Farideh said.

“Who don’t fit in anywhere,” Havilar said with a giggle. “Also two half-orcs and a dwarf that raises yaks.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Inheritance dispute,” Farideh said, giggling herself. “He says he wanted to quit his clan right.”

“*Don’t* ask him about it,” Havilar said, taking the whiskey. “Or you’ll know far too much about his brother-in-law. Far. Too. Much.”

“If I ever find your secret village,” Brin said, “I’ll make certain I avoid it. Why did you leave? To find your parents?”

Farideh dropped her eyes and shut her mouth. Havilar took an extra-long swig of whiskey that ended with a gasp and a cough. “Whew!” she cried. “This is strong.”

Brin was watching them carefully, his eyes skipping from one to the other. The longer they didn’t answer, Farideh thought, the more he’d think of his own reasons, and the more he thought of his own reasons, the more awful those reasons might become. Robbery. Murder. Devil worship.

Were they worse than binding yourself to a devil you couldn’t say no to?

“Even outcasts have outcasts,” Farideh said lightly. “We … were involved in some mischief that upset the wrong people. It wasn’t on purpose, but … people were upset.”

Brin’s eyes lit, as if he knew exactly what she meant, and he nodded. She could sense Havilar beside her, relaxing into the safe blandness of that explanation. They might keep him still. “I have certainly been acquainted with those circumstances,” Brin said.

“Is that why you had to leave?” Havilar asked, passing Farideh the bottle. “From wherever you’re from?”

“I didn’t *have* to leave.” Again, that look of discomfort. It was starting to rattle on Farideh’s nerves, and the whiskey did nothing for it. She wrapped her hands around the top of the bottle, pressing her palms into the glass, and willed the shadows not to gather around her.

“Truth is, I’m from Cormyr,” he finally said. “I guess … I don’t really fit there. With my family and such. It seemed better that I get out of their way.”

“ ‘Out of their way’?” Havilar said. “What are they? Rampaging tarrasques?”

Brin chuckled. “Not quite that bad. More like … rampaging dire bears. But with more rules. They *don’t* appreciate mischief any more than secret villages do.”

“I don’t think anyone appreciates having a building blown up,” Havilar said.

Farideh’s every muscle stiffened. “Havi!”

Brin’s mouth fell open. “Is … is that what you did?”

“Sort of,” Havilar said.

“Why? How?” He was positively goggling.

“On accident,” Farideh said. It’s not going to make a difference, she thought. He’s already made up his mind. They would have to run. “It was magic gone awry.”

“It was my fault,” Havilar said quickly, her face as red as Farideh was sure her own was. “I was doing spells that were too powerful. Nobody died. Nobody … really got hurt.” Her hand closed on Farideh’s. “It was our own house.”

Brin glanced from one to the next and finally shook his head. “Well, you have me beat. The worst thing I’d ever done was run away. Granted,” he added, “I did make a point of doing so regularly enough.”

Farideh took a swig of whiskey and passed it on, grateful that Havilar had defused the situation, but angry that Havilar again took responsibility. Farideh had taken the pact, she’d made the decision,

she hadn't stumbled into it. It was her doing alone. If anyone was to blame it was Farideh. If anyone got hurt, it was Farideh too.

Brin frowned. "But why were you doing spells? You're not a spellcaster."

"I can cast a little bit of magic," Havilar said. "Just not very well. Apparently. I'm better with blades and Fari's better at magic, that's all."

He turned to Farideh. "You're a sorcerer, aren't you? Is the explosion what happened to your eye?"

Farideh's cheeks were still burning. "No."

"It's always been like that," Havilar said quickly. "Mehen says it happens sometimes. It happens a lot more in dogs. It just surprises some people because, well, silver and gold look strange to humans —"

"Havi," Farideh said, and her sister stopped. She looked at Brin hard. "It's just an eye."

"All right," he said. "I really didn't mean any offense. I suppose you hear that a lot?"

"I do hear that a lot," she said after a moment. "It doesn't take much for some people to be superstitious."

"They don't know any better," Brin said, with a wave of his hand that Farideh had to remind herself wasn't supposed to be dismissive. Even if it felt like it. Even if it made her anger squeeze tight around her chest.

"I thought you might be a wizard at first, but you don't have a spellbook."

"Or," she said lightly, "a lot of patience. Sorry I snapped."

He grinned. "Here"—he handed her back the bottle of whiskey —"friends?"

For now, Farideh thought gloomily, but she took the whiskey from him. "Friends," she said, and she raised the bottle before taking a sip and passing it on to Havilar.

"To winning!" she said, before taking her own turn. She giggled. "I don't care what Mehen says, I think all seven orcs count."

"To Neverwinter," Brin said, "and new beginnings."

“What will you do in Neverwinter?” Farideh asked. Though it had been a little cruel of Havilar to point it out, he wasn’t cut out to build houses and haul rock.

Brin shrugged. “Whatever someone will pay me for. I’ll save it up and …” He trailed off and took another, bolder sip of the whiskey. “And do something *I* want to do.”

“*Why* Neverwinter?” Havilar asked. “It’s up at the edge of the world. And it’s fallen down. I heard anyway. D’you have a lady friend up there?”

Brin chuckled. “No. I don’t know anyone in Neverwinter, truth be told. It …” He hesitated a moment. “Look … I’m not a refugee really. No one in my family’s from Neverwinter. But I think I could pass. Start a life of some sort. New beginnings, as I said.”

“So long as your house hasn’t already fallen down,” Havilar said with mock solemnity. “I hear, too, that it’s teeming—*teeming*—with monsters. And volcanoes.”

“And orcs,” Brin said. “And warlocks.”

Farideh froze. “Warlocks?”

“Right. The … Hellish sort. That’s what they say, anyway.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. I read … somewhere … some devil tried to take Neverwinter over once. Maybe even an archdevil. Ages ago though. Before the Spellplague. So maybe that’s why they all go there. But it’s probably nonsense. People say all sorts of things. I mean, do you know how many stories people tell about how the city got its name?”

Farideh nodded, not really hearing Brin. If Neverwinter were full of warlocks, there had to be at least one among them who knew how to keep a devil in hand. It stood to reason—didn’t it?—that Farideh could not be the only warlock in Toril who didn’t start down the path with the intention of being wicked. And she couldn’t be the only one with a devil who wouldn’t leave her alone.

If she went to Neverwinter, she might find someone who could show her a way to at least give Lorcan pause. Perhaps someone to show her how to leash him. If she could keep him from turning up so often, if she could keep him from needling at her brand, if she could keep him at armslength …

Then what? He might strip away her powers, just to show he could. He might do something to punish her. He might hurt Mehen or Havilar.

He might leave her entirely.

"Here," Havilar said, pressing the whiskey bottle into her hand. "Catch up, worrywart."



Mehen didn't bother with his own dinner. The food he'd eaten that morning still sat heavy in his belly. No need to add to it. Better to stay sharp than to keep a human's eating habits for the sake of plenty.

The caravans had been a waste of time. Nobody knew anything or anybody. Nobody had seen the woman from the leaflet, or a woman who looked like her, or any human woman ever for that matter.

"*M'henish,*" he grunted to himself. Three days would get them back to Waterdeep and maybe that was best. Maybe there was some other caravan in need of guards, or some other bounty he could catch and leave the girls out of it. Maybe they should just get lost in the City of Splendors and hope no one ever noticed.

The priest's offer still weighed on his mind. The coins he'd handed over for a room and food for his girls had lightened their purse significantly. A few more and they could head north enough to catch up with this blasted bounty.

To the Hells and back, he thought. What was he doing considering the offer of a silverstar with a chain that might as well be a third arm, he used it with such casualness? He'd tapped his tongue to the roof of his mouth repeatedly, but there was no taste in the air to suggest the priest was a threat beyond what he'd seen with his own eyes. He'd kept tapping out of nerves.

He imagined Farideh, stiff and swaddled in her cloak as long as the priest was around, and sighed. What was he going to do with her? He'd been so sure she'd been keeping that devil away, and all the while they were creeping around behind briars. At least she wouldn't dare let the bastard come around while Havilar was with

her—he was sure of that. Havilar kept a secret like a sieve kept water.

Not for the first time, he cursed the path that had led him here, mucking around in the wilds of Faerûn, chasing down petty criminals and trying to find two coins to rub together while keeping the twins alive. But it was a path he had made on his own, and given a second chance, he couldn't say he wouldn't have made every choice exactly the same way a second time. He scratched the piercing holes again as he came into the taproom.

And if he hadn't made those decisions, where would Farideh and Havilar be? They were smart, resourceful girls—but were they such because he had raised them up that way, or because it beat in their blood? And resourceful, smart, or utter fools, they would never have made it out of the village that day after the snow had fallen so heavy. He might have been denied his own offspring, but the twins were his legacy.

The taproom had filled up with merchants and mercenaries, refugees to and from the North. He stood in the entryway a moment, sizing up the room with an old soldier's eye. For the better part of Clanless Mehen's life—when he had been Verthisathurgiesh Mehen, son of Pandjed, and even after—he'd trained himself to be ready for a fight, just in case.

Three men playing cards on his right. Them first—they were mercenaries. That armor was too nice, and yet mismatched—as if they'd bought a pauldron here, a chain shirt there, as the coin came in. They'd be the most dangerous, if only because they were the most unpredictable.

Dagger in the close one's back, crack the bottle on the second, the third would be up and drawing his own weapon, but that one was drunk enough, Mehen would have time to flip the dagger into him, and pull his falchion from his back.

The woman standing on his left, waiting for her partner or employer, would be on him quick then with her double swords. Drop to the floor—she'd expect him to use his size like a brute—cut her with a swing from behind. Finish with the dagger.

He walked to the bar, straight and steady—but his mind was full of quick, dancing slashes and dodges. The barkeep raised an eyebrow at him as he approached.

The barkeep would be a quick thing—not a real threat. The worst that could happen was for him to be a caster with a wand back there, and Mehen doubted that.

Still: aggressive attack, up over the bar, falchion across the front of him.

"Well met," Mehen said. "I'm looking for someone."

The barkeep looked him up and down, as he wiped down bottles of wine. "This isn't Waterdeep," he said. "Don't have your sort."

Mehen growled. He doubted even Waterdeep could boast that variety. He pulled the leaflet free and smoothed it out on the table. "This one," he said. "Have you seen her?"

The barkeep gave the posting a cursory glance. "Nah. What are you drinking?"

"I'm not. You get a lot of caravans through here?"

"You're in my tavern, you're drinking." The barkeep set a glass down in front of Mehen and started to pour something golden from a bottle beading with moisture. Mehen's hand shot out and grasped the bottle, halting its tilt.

"You pour that, you'll be wasting your coin and both of our times. I don't drink in anybody's tavern." He let go of the bottle. "Do you get a lot of caravans through here?"

The man set the bottle down and gave Mehen a stony glare. "Some."

"One a tenday? Two?"

"Two or three every few days. Sometimes more. Never seen your bounty though."

"Anybody here come in off one of those caravans?"

"Fair well everybody. Ask who you like, but don't you start a fight you can't clean up."

Mehen drummed his thick nails against the counter. They needed to find this wretched bounty or get themselves another, easier one. Or both, he thought.

"What about orcs?" he said.

The barkeep looked at him as if he were mad. “Don’t get too many in here. The sorts of things Many-Arrows brews either go foul too fast or burn right through a cask before I can sell it all.”

“No. What about bounties on orcs? We took a troop out that attacked a caravan south of here. Anyone paying bounties for them?”

The barkeep shook his head. “I’m certainly not. Swarms of the buggers. Nothing to be done.”

Mehen fought the urge to remind the barkeep he ought to be more deferential. You have no clan to back you, he reminded that angry young voice that told him to pull his daggers out and make his point with steel.

“Anybody paying *any* bounties along here?” Mehen asked. “Or you just live in an easy little world where no one’s any trouble.”

“Try Neverwinter,” the barkeep said. “Full of all the criminals too lazy to make it to Luskan, too weak to survive Luskan, and too scared to try Luskan. And the Lord Protector is wealthy enough and foolish enough to pay people to remedy something as unfixable as *that.*”

The words, Mehen thought, of a man who had never been to a place. He left the bar and tried his luck with a smattering of patrons: the bored woman, the mercenaries in the corner, a merchant here and there. No one knew the woman from the bounty poster.

“*M’henish,*” he grunted to himself as he tromped back upstairs. The priest’s offer was looking better and better. He pushed open the door.

The twins were sitting on the floor with that boy, that Brin from the caravan. Havilar giggled wildly. Farideh had a bottle of whiskey to her mouth, her head tilted back.

“Farideh!” Mehen barked. She pulled the bottle away, spitting liquor down her shirt and coughing.

He couldn’t stop the thoughts that time: If the devil overwhelmed her, he’d have to bring Havilar down first—fast, subdued. Press the vessel on her neck until she fainted and couldn’t attack him. That would give Farideh time to prepare, but he couldn’t believe she’d

strike, even poisoned by that fiend, if he held her sister before him. He could still subdue her. But if she did attack, then he'd have to use the breath—

Stop it, he said to himself. Farideh was looking up at him, her cheeks scarlet, her knuckles white around the whiskey bottle, and that awful smoky darkness curling its way around her frame. She was nearly a woman, but crumpled on the floor like that it was hard not to think of her as small and awkward and caught up late with Havilar. Probably trying to convince Havi to go to bed, he thought.

Ah, Fari, he thought. I never thought it would be you.

"Give me that," he snapped, snatching the bottle from her. He sniffed it—backwater still-shit, harder than it needed to be—and took a swig, despite the fact he knew he'd be flat out and snoring within a half hour because of it. Better than up and thinking about the fact he'd considered how to take out his child. "Where in the Hells did you get this?"

"Downstairs," Brin said. "It was part of my … room fee."

Mehen was too tired to reprimand someone else's orphan—even when clearly he was the one starting all this trouble. He heaved a great sigh and sat in one of the chairs. It creaked under his weight.

"Did you find her?" Havilar asked. "Are we going to get her?"

"What would you have done if I had?" he said. "You two are in no shape now to take down anyone." Havilar squinted at Mehen.

"I think I could."

"Of course you do," Mehen said. "That's the whiskey talking."

"But you *didn't* find her," Farideh said.

"No," Mehen said. "Which *doesn't* mean we've passed her by. I do know what I'm doing." Farideh folded her arms over her chest, but didn't say anything.

He set the whiskey bottle on the table and considered his girls for a moment. His clever, strong, dangerous girls. "But I did find another job for us."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Palace of Ossela, Malbolge, The Nine Hells

Lorcan stepped through the portal into a small room dominated by a green obelisk as tall as he was and enclosed by fleshy walls that oozed a sickly, yellow fluid. A polyp of glowing tissue hung from the ceiling, casting the orderly piles of Exalted Invadiah's treasure in a cold light.

He held still while the portal swirled around the base of the Needle of the Crossroads and scanned his mother's treasure room. Nothing. Sairché wasn't waiting for him. He let out a breath and stepped away, shutting the portal of the Needle of the Crossroads.

Godsdamned Sairché. What was she playing at?

A large iron mirror hung on the wall beside the Needle. As Lorcan stepped close, the spells woven into a matching iron pin on his sleeve stirred the reflection on the surface, and his reflection became that of a young tiefling man, laboring over a book in the candlelight. Lorcan waved his hand and the image slipped away, replaced by a middle-aged tiefling woman with striking silver hair looking out a window. The brand that marked her as Lorcan's warlock was prominently displayed, framed by a series of cut-outs along the back of her dress.

The scrying mirror slid from one tiefling warlock to the next. Thirteen warlocks—each descended from the original thirteen tieflings in Faerûn who had made the Pact Infernal with Asmodeus himself, trading the admixture of fiendish blood in their veins for the king of the Hells' own.

Or so they say, Lorcan thought.

Regardless of history, a full complement of the tiefling heirs was rare and difficult to come by. Lorcan only knew of three other devils who had managed it, all further up the cutthroat hierarchy of the Hells than he'd ever be.

The trouble was, when a warlock was so invested in channeling the powers of the Hells as to make a pact with the king of the Hells himself, they didn't tend to spend much time raising offspring. The men of the original thirteen tieflings had mostly scattered their offspring, making the lines difficult to trace. The women had only bothered with one or two as experiments or heirs to raise. After a hundred years, their living descendants totaled in the mere dozens. The rarest heirs—those of Bryseis Kakistos, the Brimstone Angel, leader of the thirteen—had been widely numbered at three, until he found Farideh.

If anyone asked, Lorcan would say that it had been his keen intellect and dogged research that had led him to a lost heir of Bryseis Kakistos. But it had been, in fact, bare luck, and even Lorcan had to admit that to himself.

On his smallest finger, he'd worn a ring which could sense the blood of Bryseis Kakistos—a handy little trinket he had bought off a devil who claimed it was infallible … despite the rival's lack of a Kakistos heir. Lorcan had been skeptical, but he had also been desperate and frustrated at the incompleteness of his warlock set. Had he not—had he cared less, had he chosen a different group of warlocks to gather, had he put his efforts to stealing his rivals' Kakistos heirs—he might have killed Havilar, left her sister to take the blame, and been on his way, never realizing what he'd briefly found.

When Havilar had cast her ritual to summon an imp she could practice her blade skills on, he had merely been nearby, strangling the imp for shitting on his boots. Angry and ready to strangle the person who had opened a portal practically on top of him, he had stepped through and seen a gangly tiefling girl.

The Kakistos ring had turned to ice as he stood there, naming the Brimstone Angel's heir. No one with such an innocent sense of the world had ever summoned him before. Twelve pacts in his hands,

and Lorcan knew he wasn't going to gain the thirteenth from this guileless girl in love with her blade. She did not need him and she did not want him But then Farideh came through the door. Havilar's twin, her pretty face scowling, shifting expressions as if she were having an angry conversation in her own thoughts. The book was a good sign, the lack of weapon even better. But that expression—ah, gods, that expression. Here, he thought, is a girl who wants something she cannot get.

She had stared at him, like a mouse before a cobra, like she was fighting with herself to stay away. He had smiled and the ring had gone cold as ice again.

Everything had fallen together. Mostly. He wouldn't pretend she was the simplest one to handle. Not by a long shot. She was afraid of him, but not so far as to be cowed by him. She wanted the powers, but not so much as to do his bidding to get them. Her pulse raced in very interesting ways when he got close enough, but not so interesting as to overcome her good sense and keep her from slipping out of reach.

Not so interesting, he thought irritably, that she didn't pipe up with strange questions like how old was he.

Lorcan had been careful as he could not to let on about Farideh's identity—he knew it drove his rivals fairly mad, and more than one didn't believe he had made the set. If Sairché was stalking his warlocks, it was only his Kakistos heir she could be after and there was no way she could be sure that was Farideh, short of having the ring he had made a point of destroying once he had his heir.

But as he checked each of the other twelve in turn, he saw no signs of Sairché scrutinizing them. Perhaps she was only following Lorcan. Perhaps she'd give up if he didn't check up on any of them. He ran a hand through his hair. Clever Sairché was his only full-blooded sister, and the only one he had never learned to predict.

What *was* she playing at? he wondered.

He fingered the scourge-shaped pendant he wore and the mirror slid to Farideh. She was still in the room, sitting on the floor beside Havilar and some human boy Lorcan couldn't place. They were laughing and Farideh took a bottle of some brownish liquor from

the boy, her cheeks flushed. Even through the scrying glass, Lorcan could sense the tendrils of divine magic that swirled around the boy.

He narrowed his eyes—the boy from the caravan. The one Farideh had saved.

And he was a godsbedamned priest.

Or not, Lorcan thought. He'd assumed the traces of divine magic among the caravan's members were coming from a pair of priests, but the boy had no mark of who he served on his person. Maybe a priest, but not necessarily …

It didn't matter whether the boy was a priest, a paladin, or just particularly devout—the blessing of some god wafted off him like a pall of incense.

Sairché and her meddling would have to wait.

Bad enough Mehen was at Farideh to break the pact, Lorcan didn't need some pious little nit tugging on his warlock's already all-too-principled heartstrings.

"You ought to come with us," he heard Havilar say, the magic of the mirror adding a warble to her voice. "We're heading in the same direction."

Lorcan seized the iron frame of the mirror in both hands. The hard edges cutting into his hands kept his head clear. To go back to Farideh would be foolish. To go back would give Sairché a path to follow again, would give Farideh something to be afraid of or angry about, would give Mehen more targets for his campaign against Lorcan. She wasn't in danger. Her pact wasn't in danger. Yet. He could fix this.

The boy in the room took the bottle back. He would be very simple to get rid of. So simple, that perhaps Lorcan could get rid of Mehen too.

Lorcan turned back to the Needle and held the image of the road where he'd surprised Farideh behind the brambles in his mind. So simple. So clean. She'd never question it.

Lorcan made his way up the dark road and through the brush a ways before he found what he was searching for. The last breathing orc from the caravan attack lay spread-eagled on the ground, his midsection thick with blood and charred from the spell Farideh had cast. Lorcan rolled his eyes; a very good thing she hadn't realized the damage she'd done. She'd probably have tried to nurse him back to health.

"End it," the orc half-cursed, half-prayed at the darkening sky. The stars stared back, uncaring, watching the paralyzed orc weep blood from a hundred wicked burns. "Gruumsh, what have I not devoted to you?" he muttered. "Take my bloody soul."

"Those sound like the words of a man ready to die," Lorcan said. He called a ball of light into being, cupped in his palms. The orc startled—or would have if he could have moved, Lorcan suspected. As it was, only his face twitched.

"*Arghash.*" The orc sneered. "Leave me be."

"*I* think," Lorcan said, ignoring the epithet, "that you don't want to die. I think if you did you would have gotten on with it a long time ago. I think you want to live."

"Not for your price, devil," the orc wheezed.

"You haven't heard me out," Lorcan said, squatting down beside him. "You ought to. I'm terribly reasonable and more than a little astute. There's only one thing you want badly enough to treat with me: vengeance."

The orc paused at that. "The bitch who burned me and left me here?"

"In a way. You can't have her, but I want the boy and the dragonborn she travels with dead. Kill them, spare the warlock, and you'll live out your days however you please."

The orc's face contorted in pain and he coughed, dark blood spattering his lips. "Not worth it," he managed.

"Do you really think Gruumsh will take up your soul after a little tiefling girl laid you low?" Lorcan asked. "My offer's far better than the one he's making you."

"I want the witch."

Lorcan scowled. “I’m not bargaining,” he said. “Take what I’m offering, or go to your god and see what he says.”

The orc hesitated. “Why not her?”

“Because she and I have an understanding,” Lorcan said. “Trust me that she’ll agonize over that brat’s death though. The dragonborn’s far more so. And *you’ll* be alive. Better, don’t you think, than being hunted in the afterlife by Gruumsh One-Eye, and those who have *not* disappointed him?”

He could see the orc considering that. For all Lorcan knew, the vicious god of the orcs would think falling to a warlock in an ill-conceived supply raid was the most honorable death imaginable. But what was true didn’t matter. Only what the orc feared *might* be true mattered.

And, Lorcan thought, watching the orc’s breathing grow more labored still, this much is true: whether this orc is in for such a hunt or not, that death would be the worse fate. He hadn’t lied.

The orc’s silence drew on, and Lorcan’s temper started to fray. Perhaps he needed to make the orc’s situation *worse*—

The orc wet his lips. “I’ll take your deal, devil.”

“Lovely,” Lorcan said, his anxiety abating. Now it was business. Nothing else. He stood and produced a piece of parchment, a glass flask of a green and vile fluid, and a small bag. “Then we are entered into what we call the Pact Certain. Your soul is mine upon death, regardless of its disposition, and you get to live for the moment. Agreed?”

The orc’s eyes were starting to glaze. “Yesss …” The letters on the parchment flashed then faded, as the agreement was made.

“Good. Well met …” Lorcan skimmed the page. “… Goruc.” He rolled up the parchment, and flicked the cork out of the flask.

Lorcan poured half the fluid over Goruc’s wounds, then roughly tilted the orc’s head back and poured the remainder down his throat. The orc coughed and thrashed—Hells-brewed potions tasted like coals going down, Lorcan knew. He watched unconcerned as the orc’s face flushed again, as he stopped fighting, as he sat up, looking down at his bloody, burned, and tattered hide.

“That’s it?” Goruc asked. “A healing draft?”

“What did you expect?” Lorcan asked, standing. “A swim through the River Styx? You’ll find I’m a practical patron, Goruc. And—as I said—reasonable, as long as my terms are met.” He held out the parchment. “The details of our agreement. Your assent suffices and is binding, there is no need to sign. You want to read it, just ask.” He pinched a charm on his wrist between forefinger and thumb, and sent the contract to a safe place. Whether Goruc *wanted* to read the contract or not, it was all but impossible. The Supernal letters would look like nothing more than corby tracks to the orc.

“And this,” Lorcan said, holding out the small velvet sack, “is to help you complete our agreement.”

Goruc teased the package open. Inside lay a vial of dark red liquid and a wad of herbs tied with a dried piece of sinew.

“Take the liquid,” Lorcan said, “coat your blades in it and your enemies will suffer and die. The leaves are wyssin. When you find their trail, light the end and inhale the smoke. It will make you spot things quicker and give strength to your limbs like you’ve never had. Don’t waste it. Take a little when you’re ready to leave and a little before you go for the kill. That’s all you need.”

Goruc gave him a far cannier look than Lorcan ever expected. “Why do you want the boy dead?”

Lorcan narrowed his eyes. “Personal reasons.”

“Personal like he’s claiming your girl?”

“Personal like he’s getting under my skin and promising to make trouble. Not that it matters to you,” Lorcan said. “Just kill him and the dragonborn, and I’ll ask nothing else for the rest of your days.”

Goruc sniffed, but kept his mouth shut.

Lorcan eyed him, wishing he could hear the orc’s thoughts. It was Lorcan’s bad luck the only available orc was one Farideh had injured. But surely even an orc was not so stupid as to break a promise to a devil. Even if he were, chances were excellent that the orc would kill the boy and then find himself halfway up Mehen’s oversized sword. And Lorcan still could make certain Farideh was protected.

Nevertheless, the orc had a sly look about him.

“Remember, Goruc,” he said, reopening the portal. “Kill who you like, but you don’t *touch* her.”

“Aye,” he heard Goruc say as Lorcan passed into Malbolge. “Don’t *touch* the witch.”



The hallways of the palace of Osseia throbbed ever so gently as Lorcan walked along them, leaving a trail of bloody footprints where he stepped. Fleshy pink walls trembled with the tortured ghosts of the previous ruler’s thoughts. He brushed too close and a bloody mucus smeared across his sleeve. He grimaced and wiped it on a bit of bone that jutted out of a corner.

The barely living halls did nothing to deaden the piercing screams echoing through the skull palace as Lorcan made his way through his mother’s apartments. He pressed a finger to his ear—they were particularly loud today. Someone must have displeased Glasya, the lord of the Sixth Layer herself, to warrant such a torture session.

“May I never be so stupid,” he muttered.

Lorcan approached the drawing room where his mother had retreated earlier that morning, waiting for a guest, and slowed his pace. He heard Invadiah’s sharp voice as he approached and heard someone else’s muffled answer.

Like most of the items in her treasury, Invadiah found the Needle of the Crossroads—a singular artifact that opened a temporary portal that could be tied to anywhere in Toril—better suited to lording over her rivals than its intended purpose. Lorcan didn’t know if Invadiah had any idea he used it, but with Invadiah there was always a difference between what you did, and what she caught you doing while she was in a bad mood.

Fourteen of his dozens of half-sisters—all erinyes from before the Ascension—had died for that seemingly minor distinction.

Between the irritated tone of his mother’s voice and the fact that two of his half-sisters were certainly guarding the larger treasury and armory, Lorcan knew it was no time to play the odds. He

needed Invadiah to give him permission. He lingered in the doorway a moment.

Exalted Invadiah, champion of Glasya and leader of the *pradixikai*—the erinyes who carried out the archduchess's justice—sat in a chair made of burnished bones, her mane of deepnight hair cascading nearly to the floor. Instead of her usual char black armor, the erinyes wore a gown of chain and hard, carapace-like plates of such a vibrant gold they seemed to smolder. Her black nails tapped a beat that made the screams that lilted through the window seem musical. He could see her face in profile, her jaw as it ground.

"There is not another devil in the Hells as useless as you," she snarled.

Lorcan started to protest, but then a dark shape fluttered past the lamps.

"Useless?" a voice as mellifluous as an angel's said. "We are nearly there. He is in my grasp."

Invadiah surged onto her feet—hooves that had crushed demons and broken souls into dust—and bellowed up at the rafters, "Your grasp? And what is that worth?"

Her eyes tracked the graceful female form that dropped to the ground, her dark wings raised. Red hair curled around the creature's lovely face, as if the strands were alive.

"Much, much more than what you have without me," the succubus said. "Every other agent has fallen or been discovered. I'm all you have, because I'm the best."

The erinyes growled. "You are replaceable."

"By whom?"

Invadiah towered over the succubus. "By anyone. By my daughters with their swords flaming."

The succubus chortled. "The time it takes to draw a breath, and the whole of Neverwinter would be screaming if your *lovely* daughters appeared. Trust me. You need one who can pass unnoticed."

"You're taking too long with your skulking and secrets. I would be rid of you gladly."

The succubus shook her head, setting her ruby ringlets shivering. “I know too much,” she said saucily. “I might tell someone.”

Invadiah moved like a striking serpent. She seized the succubus by the neck, her long black nails pressing into the creature’s pale throat, and slammed her against the wall. The succubus squawked.

“Do you think that wise?” Invadiah purred.

The succubus struggled and kicked her long, lovely legs, but the erinyes didn’t flinch.

“You may be the archduchess’s only agent in Neverwinter, but you will *always* be replaceable, Rohini,” Invadiah hissed. “You don’t threaten Glasya. You don’t threaten me. And you don’t fly in my presence. Ever. Again.” She let the succubus fall to the floor and Lorcan’s stomach dropped.

Rohini.

Hells, he thought. He wondered if his mother knew just who she was picking a fight with.

Rohini stood, rubbing her neck, her chest heaving. “I … beg your pardon, Lady Invadiah.” She made a tidy little curtsey. “I will press forward. The priest will have the proper connections within a few days.”

“When you get back,” Invadiah corrected.

Rohini’s red eyes flickered. “That will be dangerous. He isn’t Anthus. We cannot risk the Old Ones—”

“Do not tell me what we cannot risk!” Invadiah said. “This is my undertaking. I know where we stand. If your initial target is dead, then you must make do with what you have. There is a reason Glasya chose you.”

It was as close to a compliment as Lorcan had ever heard an erinyes bestow upon a succubus. Rohini’s eyebrow twitched—as close as he’d ever seen a succubus come to acknowledging the compliment of an erinyes.

Unattractive succubi didn’t exist—as mutable as their forms were, how could they? Succubi were the consorts of archdevils, the infiltrators and spies of the lords themselves, corruptors of many on the mortal planes.

Fantastic lays, Lorcan thought.

But long ago, before Lorcan was born, the Hells had been at war against the demons of the Abyss … and in that time, the succubi fought on the demons' side, the polar opposites and sworn enemies of the erinyes.

That mad, demon spark, as far as Lorcan and most of the Hells were concerned, still lingered. You could see it in their eyes. It didn't matter if they'd turned traitor just as Asmodeus rose to the godhood, ceding their blood and their offspring's blood to the lord of the Ninth's control, and—the rumors went—giving Asmodeus the last bit of power he needed to hurl the Abyss to the very farthest reaches of the Elemental Chaos, ending the war for good.

Lorcan had his doubts about that—everyone claimed to have been the lynchpin of Asmodeus's ascension. Sycophants, all of them.

A slow smile curved Rohini's lovely lips.

"You have a visitor," Rohini said softly, "Lady Invadiah."

His mother stiffened and looked over her shoulder. "Lorcan."

"Mother," he said, stepping into the room. "And Rohini."

Rohini gave him a long, appraising look, as if she were assessing a cut of meat. No, he thought with a suppressed shudder, as if she were deciding which of his bones she should pluck out and suck the marrow free of first.

Sycophants or not, succubi were dangerous. Especially—if the rumors were true—Rohini. Lorcan had heard the archduchess had sent Rohini alone into Stygia, the layer of Hell ruled by one of Glasya's most hated enemies. What the succubus had found or done on those frozen plains, Lorcan didn't know, but he'd heard she'd returned to Malbolge covered in blood and carrying the severed hands of one of Archduke Levistus's prized commanders. There might be a spark of madness in her eyes, but she had to be devilishly clever to manage something like that.

Lorcan knew better than to let her more obvious charms sway him. Rohini would eat him alive just to irritate Invadiah.

Invadiah glared at him. "Where have you been?"

"Toril."

His mother raised an eyebrow. "Out playing with your warlocks?"

He didn't react. "Something like that."

"Warlocks?" Rohini said. "How interesting." Lorcan tensed.

"He has a set," Invadiah said, and as ever, Lorcan couldn't tell if she was proud or mocking or enjoying putting him in a little peril. "A full thirteen."

"Well, well," Rohini said. "A Toril Thirteen? How ever did you manage that? I'd thought the Kakistos line was all claimed or dead." Lorcan tensed—Rohini didn't collect warlocks, he was almost certain. But much like Sairché, she might very well collect secrets.

"You really don't expect me to tell you, do you?" Lorcan said and immediately regretted it. Her eyes took on an especially predaceous glint.

"Oh, I expect you'd tell me anything I liked."

"Rohini," Invadiah said. The succubus stopped, but the force of her charm hung in the air like a thousand darts caught midflight. The room was silent but for the screams of the damned outside. Lorcan held perfectly still.

"You interrupted us," Invadiah said.

"My apologies," he said. "I was merely coming to visit—which I see you don't have time for; a pity—and to see if I might borrow one of your baubles."

"What do you want?"

"The Rod of the Traitor's Reprisal."

Invadiah frowned. "Are your toys fighting?"

He shrugged. "I do have a rather rare heir to protect."

Invadiah stared out the window a long moment, drumming her nails against the armrest again. "Fine. Put it back when you're done."

"Of course," Lorcan said. He turned to go. Invadiah reached out and seized his arm in her iron grip.

"What did you hear?" Invadiah asked.

He cleared his throat. "I merely overheard you giving Rohini here, ah, lessons of etiquette."

Invadiah and Rohini both fixed him with burning eyes, and it was only the training of his entire life that kept him from flinching. He returned the gaze, if a little more insouciantly.

“What benefits us, benefits Asmodeus,” Rohini said.

“And what benefits Asmodeus benefits us all,” Lorcan said. A common enough saying in the Hells. “I’ll leave you to your … studies of the hierarchy, Rohini. Mother.”

He left the room as swiftly as he could, not looking back and listening with particular intent to the chorus of screams rather than another word of the conversation coming from the softly pulsing room.

Whatever Invadiah and Rohini were up to, they did not want him to know about it—and that was fine by Lorcan. He was no status seeker. With a human father, the hierarchy of the Hells was closed to him. While Rohini might please Glasya and earn her way to a transformation into an erinyes, and Invadiah to something greater still, Lorcan would always be a cambion, no matter whose boots he licked or whose schemes he chased.

Luckily, it suits me, he thought, striding through the hallways of Osseia. His mother might think him a dabbler and a dandy, but at least he’d managed to never become her pawn.

His path crossed a balcony that overlooked the Court of the Sixth, and Lorcan paused a moment. The archduchess herself perched on the throne, carved from the ivory that had been her predecessor’s teeth, her batlike wings curved around her like an icon’s niche. Coppery skinned and dark-haired, Glasya made Rohini look common. Glasya made *everything* look common. If corruption had a form, it was Glasya, and not a soul looked upon her that didn’t feel the urge to throw itself headlong into that corruption. She radiated like a star and she swallowed up the light around her. To look upon Glasya, Lord of the Sixth and Princess of the Hells, was a special sort of madness.

Glasya regarded the prostrate barbed devil in front of her with a stony face, while a swarm of hellwasps swooped around her, enforcing the audience’s distance with their sword-length stingers and bladed legs. A pair of pit fiends the size of small hills flanked Glasya’s throne, all muscle and whips. Devils of a hundred sorts stood, perched, or hovered in audience, giving the unfortunate barbed devil a wide berth.

Glasya tapped her scourge against the side of her throne as if counting time, while the creature before her shivered to the tips of the spikes that covered its black, muscular body. The barbed devils were the spy-hunters of the archduchess—tasked with hunting down intruders and agents of the other Lords of the Nine, the rulers of the layers of the Hells.

This one had failed in its task apparently. If it was lucky, Lorcan thought, riveted, Glasya would demote it. If it wasn't … Well, it had heard the intruder's screams as well as Lorcan had.

"May I never be so foolish," he muttered to himself once more. You did not fail a Lord of the Nine—and if you did, you did not get caught holding the bag.

I know too much, Rohini had said. *I might tell someone*.

Do you think that wise? his mother had said. *You don't threaten Glasya.*

Lorcan shivered. Whatever they were up to, those comments made two things certain. First, it was on Glasya, the lord of the Sixth Layer's orders. Whatever Rohini and Invadiah were doing in Neverwinter, the archduchess wanted it so. Getting in the way of Glasya was suicide. Second …

I might tell someone.

You don't threaten Glasya.

No one posed a true danger to Glasya except her father, Asmodeus, the lord of the Ninth Layer and the Risen God of Evil. The king of the Hells. The other lords might threaten her, other devils might pretend to her throne, but Glasya was Asmodeus's only child. To threaten Glasya at this juncture, was to threaten him.

"What benefits us, benefits Asmodeus," Lorcan murmured. "And what benefits Asmodeus, benefits us all." No devil—no sane devil—would stand against Asmodeus directly, but such a statement could cover up quite a lot of schemes.

Lorcan shook his head. He wasn't suited to being a pawn. He didn't know anything. He didn't need to know anything. He would simply stay out of it.

Glasya waved her hand and the barbed devil's muscles all contorted at once. It screamed as if Glasya were pulling its

intestines out with tenacity and a single hooked finger. It twisted and howled, and finally with an explosion of energy—burning hot and thick as soot—the barbed devil tore itself apart with a sick, wet rip. Lorcan flinched against the burning wind.

When it subsided, he looked back to the place where the barbed devil had been. There, in the tattered, bloody midst of its former body, a smaller form twitched. It jerked against the spent frame, tearing muscles, until it finally broke free and stretched delicate batlike wings. The shorter, softer quills that covered its body bristled, flinging gore over the assembled audience.

"Let that be a lesson to you," Glasya said. She spoke to the newly reborn spined devil, but every other creature there took the warning for their own: the Lady of Malbolge was not to be crossed.

"You are most kind and generous, your grace," the diminished creature gasped.

Lorcan shuddered again, and moved away from the balcony. The archduchess *had* been generous. She'd only demoted the devil, which meant it could earn its way back to the rank it had previously held—if, that is, the assembled audience forgot its failure. He left the palace and headed across the field toward the armory.

Something dripped on him from above as he passed under the overhang of the entryway. Red spots smattered his already filthy sleeve. He glanced up in disgust.

Above, the sharpened fangs that fringed the gates of Osseia impaled a pair of humans in robes. They weren't foolish enough to wear their allegiances on their sleeves, but these were almost certainly Glasya's intruders—and just as certainly, they had been cultists of another Lord of the Nine. The one on the left, a man of middling years, twitched, his body not quite finished dying.

Should Lorcan ever be so stupid as to displease the Lady of Malbolge, here was his fate. There was nowhere in the hierarchy for a half-devil to fall.

Invadiah kept her treasury in one of the tall bone-spires that rose out of Malbolge's poisoned ground. Venomous flowers twined their way over the pitted surface, fed by the streams of shimmering effluvia that shifted and changed day to day, hour to hour. The

ruddy ground, much like the halls of Osseia, lived. When they finished being an example to all, someone would throw the corpses on the fangs of Osseia to Malbolge, and slowly, the Sixth Layer would absorb them.

Lorcan picked his way across the suppurating ground and entered the tower that held his mother's treasury. Two erinyes perched on either side of the inner door, batting a dead lemure back and forth between them like a ball with the flats of their swords, keeping it from resting too long on the hungry ground.

"Nemea," Lorcan said tensely. "Aornos."

His half-sisters spared him no more than a glance, but he had hardly blinked before red-haired Aornos had maneuvered herself behind him, planting him between the two fierce warriors. He looked up at Nemea, who was slimmer than Invadiah and bore a ragged scar across her chest.

"Come to borrow more of mother's things?" she said, reversing her grip on the sword.

"At her offer," he said smoothly. "Let me pass?"

"Sairché was looking for you," Aornos said behind him. "Said we should tell her if you showed up."

"Sounds like our baby sister found a secret of yours," Nemea crooned.

Lorcan gave an exaggerated sigh. "All she found was that I don't want to seduce a mortal with her in audience. Where did she say she'd be?"

"She didn't," Nemea said.

"You'll have to hope she finds you," Aornos added.

"Or that she doesn't," Nemea finished.

"Fine," Lorcan said. "Open the doors then and let me finish my business."

Nemea smirked at him, thinking—no doubt—that she could crush him with no trouble at all. Invadiah might not even care.

Might, Lorcan thought, is the important word.

Nemea stepped aside and pulled the door open for Lorcan. As he passed, she cracked the back of his legs with the flat of her sword,

much to Aornos's amusement. Lorcan flinched, but didn't deign to cry out.

"Don't forget, little brother," Aornos called as he descended the winding stairway down to the treasury, "only what Invadiah agreed to. Wouldn't want to have to turn your pockets."

Godsdamned erinyes, he thought. Better Nemea and Aornos than the elite of the *pradixikai*. Invadiah's favorites chased down oath-breakers and those who deceived the archduchess. Nemea and Aornos weren't skilled enough or intelligent enough for the *pradixikai*.

Still, Lorcan was intelligent enough not to test them.

At the base of the stairs, there was a door made of bone, and crisscrossed with bindings of a sinew strong as steel. Lorcan laid his hand upon the seal in the center. It gave slightly and shivered at his touch before the sinews slithered out of their sockets and back toward the center, releasing the door.

Had Sairché known he was lying? he wondered. Bedding some tiefling was nothing, after all. An heir of Bryseis Kakistos was … well, nothing to most devils. But for collectors, Farideh would be priceless. If Sairché figured out who Farideh was, there were a fair number of devils in the Hells who would pay her dearly for the information.

They would still have to lure Farideh away, he thought as he passed rows of sharp and shining blades. And he'd been careful to make sure Farideh didn't want to leave, even if someone explained how.

Assuming she was safe. Assuming he got rid of that inconvenient acolyte. Assuming he was right about what Farideh wanted anymore.

How old are you?

Lorcan grit his teeth. He shouldn't be rattled by a warlock or by such a stupid question. He was the one who did the rattling—and as soon as the orc caught up to them, Farideh would be plenty rattled and in no mood to be pushing him and his pact away.

Perhaps he ought to have told the orc to leave Havilar be as well. After all, if anything should happen to Farideh, Havilar was his only

possible replacement. Then again, he mused, if Havilar died, it made Farideh even more valuable.

He shook his head. It wasn't his decision to make, anyway—Farideh would protect Havilar to her final breath. As long as Farideh had the tools to stop the orc from harming her, Havilar would be fine. And if Sairché turned out to be too much trouble after all, well, then she might as well have Havilar instead, and good luck to her.

"There," he said, spotting the Rod of the Traitor's Reprisal's telltale quartz tip. "This one."

CHAPTER SIX

NEVERWINTER

11 KYTHORN, THE YEAR OF THE DARK CIRCLE (1478 DR)

THE BELLS OVER THE SHOP DOOR TINKLED AS A BLONDE ELF WOMAN swept in. The shopkeeper, a man called Yvon Claven, nodded to her cheerfully. "A moment," he called. Knowing Sekata, she wouldn't care about the wait, but manners were manners.

"Now," he said, turning back to his original customer, a young man with a scruffy beard, "I can have the straps mended in about four days, but I do think you'd be better served with a new brigandine. This one"—he gestured sadly at the rents in the heavy cloth where the metal plates were wearing through—"isn't going to last much longer."

The young man, one of many vying for a place among the city's Mintarn defenders, sighed. "Much as I'd prefer it, I haven't the coin. Just the straps, please." He set down a small stack of silver coins, half the cost of the repair.

Poor lad, Yvon thought. Too many of them lately, lads and lasses come to Neverwinter to seek their fortunes, looking for adventure in the ancient city on the Sword Coast. Yvon—who had lived in Neverwinter all of his days and whose ancestors had lived there since well before the cataclysm that shook the City of Jewels to its very foundations—suspected they were largely overwhelmed with what they found in Neverwinter.

"You know, I've been thinking of hiring an assistant," he said. "A guard for the door, and an extra body to stand at the counter when I have things to attend to in the back. Why don't you come by in the

morning and we'll see if it suits you … what did you say your name was?"

The young man looked at him, surprised. "Kalam. And I will. Thank you."

The door bells jingled again as the young man left. When the lad came back, Yvon thought, he'd have to pour him a cup of tea and discuss the lad's options. Desperate straits made one ripe for a different path.

"All right, Sekata?" Yvon asked, as the elf woman set her basket of potions on the counter and started unloading them. The magical traces of her alliance made the air bristle even without Yvon looking for them. "Are you staying cool enough?"

The elf snorted. "In this heat? I'm lucky my potions haven't all taken to boiling and popped their seals."

Yvon chuckled and lifted one of the greenish vials up to the light streaming in through the window. "Well, they look well enough." He'd been selling Sekata's potions for years now—he trusted no one else.

Sekata took the last of them from her handbasket. "Have you heard," she drawled, "who was thrown out of the Moonstone Mask last night?"

"I didn't know *anyone* got thrown out of the Moonstone Mask," Yvon said. "Do tell."

Sekata leaned in. "Creed."

Yvon shook his head. "I ought to have guessed. What did the young idiot do?" He frowned. "It wasn't—"

"No, no," Sekata said. "Nothing like that. Only got a few cups past drunk and started a brawl."

"That sounds average—"

"*With* the serving girls."

"Oh dear."

"Poor Creed," Sekata agreed. "They look delicate, but Liset's girls know what they're doing. Got him begging for mercy before the bouncers hauled him out of there. He's lucky they didn't just throw him off the earthmote and let him land as he pleased on the rooftops."

Yvon clucked his tongue. “Does Lector know, do you think?”

“By now? I can’t imagine he hasn’t figured it out and spent half the morning playing wise older brother.” Sekata paused. “Oh no, wait. He’s been in chambers with Mordai Vell all morning. It’s possible Creed’s slipped him by entirely.”

Yvon winced. “Ah. Do you suppose Vell’s still angry about the Glasyan incident?”

“Well, the defenders *did* find all those bodies. I don’t know what you and Lector were thinking—messy, messy business all of it. If you’re going to stage a godsbedamned massacre, you should at least burn the bodies.”

“Methinks you’re just jealous you weren’t invited.”

“Yes,” Sekata said dryly, “I don’t get enough blood handling the sacrifices.”

Yvon smiled. “It’s not the same, and you know it.”

Sekata planted her hands on her hips. “The difference is a sacrifice very seldom has friends who are ready to start a street war over their deaths. At least Mordai Vell has the ounce of sense necessary to see antagonizing other cults is bound to come out badly.”

“Ah, not when you wipe them out completely. There’s something very pleasing about striking down Glasyans in particular. It’s the smugness they have that makes the difference. Goes right out of them with a sharp blade.” He patted his bald pate with a handkerchief. “Blasted heat. Anyhow, since when do you care about the Glasyans?”

“I don’t,” Sekata said. “I care about not being hauled out into the open by a bunch of overeager lads. I like my privacy, and I like not having to launder blood out of my everyday things. You two keep this up, and I’ll find another cell.”

Yvon chuckled. “I don’t think you need to worry. If Lector’s still in chambers, we’re definitely being told to quiet down.” He waved at the potions arrayed on the counter. “How much for the lot?”

“Thirty each for the healings, eight hundred for the two vitalities—if you want them—and for the cordials … let’s say fifty for the lot.”

“That’s a bit steeper than normal.”

Sekata shook her head. “The Lord Protector’s new tax collectors came to call. And unlike you, I don’t just kill people who irritate me.”

“I think most of Neverwinter would call *that* murder justified. Even Mordai Vell.” Yvon chuckled again and took the coin box out from under the counter. “I’ll take one potion of vitality, the healings and the cordials. Some of them are elderberry, yes? The elderberries always go first. You could probably make a living just distilling cordials.”

“I could,” Sekata agreed as he counted out the coins. “But I’d be bored. Will you be at the congregation tonight? The sacrifice is one of those orcs from the ruined district, and I don’t want to worry about keeping him down.”

“Who got you an orc?”

Sekata swept the coins into her purse. “Creed. It’s how I found out about the whole Moonstone Mask debacle. Hail Asmodeus,” she said, as she pulled open the door and set the bells tinkling again, “and I’ll see you tonight. Bring the staples and some extra rope. He’s a big brute.”

“Only if you bring some cordial,” Yvon replied. “Hail Asmodeus.”

Farideh woke to the bright light of full morning, Havilar still dead to the world beside her, and Mehen snoring noisily on the floor. She clambered over her sister and went, unsteadily, to the window, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

The courtyard below was nearly empty of carts and horses. Most of the travelers must have gotten underway before the sun was up and baking. Farideh glanced back at Mehen, still sleeping hard. He would have wanted them up early too—before he had the whiskey. He might have been big, but Mehen didn’t hold his drink very well.

For her part Farideh only felt a little muzzy, but that had more to do with how she’d slept—or rather not slept. She opened the window to get a breeze going and leaned out a little ways. She needed to find Brin before Mehen was up—to make sure he would

indeed travel with them and work out some story to keep Mehen from overreacting. Ask him some more about warlocks before the priest turned up. If Brin was passing as a refugee, she might need him once they got to Neverwinter so she could find those warlocks.

She poured some water in the basin and rubbed herself a little cleaner with the rag provided, before pulling on her jacks and the hooded robe. Over the basin, a cheap bronze mirror hung, and Farideh stood before it a moment, considering her reflection, considering a face she had looked at in one form or another nearly every moment of her life. The nose was too proud, she thought, the chin too weak for the heavy ridge of horn across her forehead. Why didn't it look that way on Havilar? With one hand she carefully covered her silver eye, and watched herself for a moment.

"What are you doing?" Havilar said. Farideh whipped around. Havilar was squinting at her from the bed.

"Nothing," she said. "Washing up. It's getting late. We should go." She turned and shook Mehen awake, careful to avoid his belch of lightning breath and Havilar's scrutinizing gaze. She didn't want to talk to her sister just then, or be in the crowded little room.

One's a curiosity, she thought, closing the door behind her and pulling up her hood. A little attention, but not a lot. She could go and find Brin and explain things and no one would get riled. She crept down the stairs.

Brin wasn't in the taproom. She hurried through and out the door. The courtyard was far quieter than it had been the night before—only a man in a blue cloak sleeping on a broken wagon near the inn's stables, a few dozen people milling around the well at the end of the street, and a handful of travelers sitting on the inn's portico, enjoying the sun.

Farideh hesitated, peering at the people around the well and the remaining few wagons. Brin was not there either. If he'd left already … she'd just have to find a way into the city herself. Maybe they wouldn't care. Maybe they wouldn't stop her. Gods, it would be so much easier with someone who looked like they belonged.

Especially since she knew she might be going alone.

Mehen had agreed to take their new patron as far as Neverwinter, but not to go into the city. Knowing Mehen, he wouldn't want to linger, particularly not for Farideh to stop and find other warlocks. She might have to part ways with him then, and Havi, too, if she didn't decide to stay with Farideh. It made her stomach flip. Surely Mehen wouldn't be so angry as to abandon her?

She thought of the way he'd dressed her down the night before, and the day before that. *You're not as lamb-brained as he thinks you are*, Lorcan had said. He was right. Mehen treated her as if she couldn't make a single decision without—

"Well met, my lovely," a rough voice called.

Farideh started and turned just enough that she could see the man, a wiry fellow sitting among a group of similarly well-dressed men and women under the edge of her hood. Daggers and drinks on all of them.

"Coins bright, girl? Give us your name and you and your glim little figure come join us."

She turned and started walking toward the stables. His friends sniggered.

"I'm speaking to you," the man called. She heard him stand and start across the dry grass. The stables were still half the road away, when he caught up to her. "You might well give me a 'well met' or a fair glance." He grabbed her arm.

Farideh jumped and twisted away from him. She pulled her arm up and brought her elbow down hard on his hand, breaking his grip. Hardly thinking of anything but Mehen's training, she thrust her hand out against his chest and shoved him back with the base of her palm.

It clearly startled him. He slapped her hand aside more in instinct than anything else, there was so little intent behind the strike. But she stepped away from it … and into the rut of a wagon wheel. Her ankle turned and she tumbled to the ground, her hood flying back as she landed. His friends were roaring now.

If the fact that she'd rebuffed him had startled the man, the sight of her horns shocked him. He took a step back, then glanced back at

his laughing friends. “Watching gods. You’re one of those Ashmadai,” the man said.

What that meant, Farideh had no notion. But the disgust in his voice was unmistakable. She didn’t have to worry about him harassing her into his company anymore. She wasn’t even a person anymore.

The fount of power that was the Hells swelled, and she felt the connection to her prime. She didn’t seize it. Not yet. But the threat of the man standing over her riled her nerves and the shadow miasma started to float off her. It took too much of her concentration to keep it from showing.

“No,” she said. “You have me mistaken.”

“Mistaken?” he snorted. “Much mistaken, just as you had Patrice Roaringhorn mistaken when your kind got him *murdered.*” His friends were closing on them now. “Wasn’t very wise to leave the mark of your dark god on everything.”

“Watching gods, Roglarr,” the bearded man hissed as he reached the young man. “You’re acting like an idiot. Tavern tales don’t make a murder. Patrice ran off with the wrong sort.”

“*Her* sort,” Roglarr growled.

“Well,” the dark-haired woman said, “*you* were perfectly willing to get up her skirts a minute ago. You can’t blame Patrice.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Roglarr pulled his dagger. Farideh started to speak the word that made the screaming blast of energy.

A hand caught Roglarr’s wrist, and a calm voice said, “Put the dagger down.”

Farideh stopped mid-curse. The power flowed back, waiting, swirling.

Roglarr looked up, puzzled, at the man who had been dozing in the broken cart only moments before. The sun caught the silver of the pin he wore on his blue cloak—an elaborate design of stars and eyes—and the metal of the chain he wore wrapped around his waist. Farideh’s attention lingered on the pin. As lovely as it was, it spelled trouble: in his shabby dress, a piece that fine could only be a holy symbol, the mark of a priest.

The man raised his eyebrows, like a tutor waiting for an errant pupil to answer. Roglarr sneered and fought the older man's grip, but couldn't free himself.

"Put the dagger down."

"She's a cultist," he said. "A worshiper of devils."

The priest looked down at her, his dark eyes amused. "Ah. Yes. I see what you mean now. Alone, unarmed, emblems of not a single god—good or evil—on her person—"

"They *hide* them, of course," the younger man said. "Now take your hand off of me, and help me find someone to bring her to justice."

"It sounded," the priest said, "as if you've had some tragedy of late. That can make a man foolish. If I don't miss my guess, your friend fell in with a bad crowd while you were having yourselves a little adventure in Neverwinter, hm?" He looked down at Farideh. "My dear, have you ever been to Neverwinter?"

"No," Farideh said. She stood, carefully, testing her weight on her ankle.

"Waterdeep?"

"Just the edge. Not past the wall."

"So," he said turning back to Roglarr, "it seems very unlikely that you have found yourself a secret member of the cult your friend joined, and much more likely you merely find yourself a bit embarrassed about calling down this lass and finding something you weren't expecting. Put the dagger away, Roglarr. Go back to your drinking and stop hunting for trouble."

The young man looked as if he'd rather snap the priest's head off, but instead he jerked his hand away and sheathed the dagger, before stomping back into the inn, his friends trailing.

"Many thanks," Farideh said once he'd gone. The man gave her a little bow.

"Not at all," he said. "Of course," he added, "if you *are* a member of a dark god's cult, I shall be terribly embarrassed myself."

Farideh blushed, and set her mouth in a hard line. "You needn't worry."

“Oh, my apologies,” the priest said, with a chuckle. “I’m merely teasing, and doing a rotten job of it. You’re one of the dragonborn’s girls, aren’t you? Did he tell you we’d be traveling together?”

“Oh,” Farideh said. That was where she’d seen him. The priest from the caravan. “Yes, he mentioned.”

He held out a hand. “I’m Tam.”

“Farideh,” she said, taking his proffered hand gingerly. The man grinned, and Farideh was surprised at how bright his teeth were.

“Well met, Farideh.” He looked back over her shoulder. “Where is Mehen? We were supposed to meet this morning.”

“He’s coming,” she said. “He wasn’t feeling well.” She smiled nervously, careful to keep her own pointed teeth covered.

“He seems trustworthy,” Mehen had said the night before, after telling them of the priest’s offer. “But, Fari, he’s still a priest. Sword only from here on out, and don’t test that. You’ll need to keep Lorcan’s spells a secret.”

My spells, she thought, standing before the priest. She wondered if he had spells of his own, or his goddess’s, that might tease out her connection to Lorcan whether she kept it hidden or not.

But all that worry was making the shadow-smoke start to leak out around her, trying to protect her. She held very still to keep it undisturbed, and tried to slow her breath. The priest kept looking at her.

“You come from Tymanther?” he asked. She nodded—it was close enough.

He grinned. “Whatever they say, I promise I don’t bite.”

At best, the dragonborn had little interest in the gods. At worst, they disdained them, saw them as little better than the dragon overlords and cruel titans their ancestors had escaped when their world had collided with Toril. She knew the only reason Mehen hadn’t dragged her to a priest to see about having the pact stripped away was that he hadn’t run out of options that didn’t involve making him beholden to some god or other.

But the sands in that hourglass were running low—sooner or later, he’d insist they try.

“Oh, well … we didn’t live in the city. We … came from a village on the frontier,” Farideh said. “There were … the midwife was a priestess of Chauntea.”

“Well, I promise you, priests of Selûne are just as harmless and mostly just as pleasant.”

Farideh smiled so she would not tell Tam what a horror dealing with Criella had really been. “I’m sure,” she said after a moment.

Brin came out of the stables then, picking straws from his hair. Farideh started to excuse herself, but Tam caught sight of Brin.

“Ah!” he said. “Farideh, I’d like you to meet my apprentice. Brin. He’ll be accompanying us to Neverwinter as well. Brin, you might remember Farideh?”

A look of surprise passed over Brin’s face, and Farideh pursed her lips. An apprentice priest? He’d left that out. Gods, what had she admitted to the night before?

“We’ve met,” she said.

“Yes,” Brin said. “I … we talked last night.”

“Oh good,” Tam said, with a hard look at Brin. “You took my advice.”

“There you are!” Havilar said, bounding up to them. “Why didn’t you wait for me? Good morning, Brin.”

Farideh flushed. “You were still sleeping,” she said to Havilar, even though she didn’t take her eyes off Tam. “And I just wanted to talk to Brin alone.”

“About what?” Havilar said, turning to Brin.

“About Neverwinter,” Farideh said. “This is … Tam,” she said, ignoring the daggers her sister was staring at her. “He’s the one Mehen said we’d escort. He’s Brin’s … master. This is my sister Havilar.”

“Oh,” Havilar said, though Farideh noticed she had the decency to look chagrined at ignoring him. “You were the one with the chain. It’s a very nice weapon. Well met.”

“Well met,” Tam said, “and I return the compliment. It’s not often you find such a spry glaivemaster. And Mehen?” he asked Farideh. “Will he be ready to leave soon?”

“Yes,” Havilar said. “Definitely.” She traded a glance with Farideh. “Before midday at the very latest.”



Traveling that day was faster and quieter than the day before had been. Farideh stayed as far from Tam as she could, lest her nerves overtake her and she do something stupid. It meant she was usually lagging behind everyone but Mehen, who was still nursing a headache.

But it meant she had time to think.

Lorcan had let her be all morning. If she were lucky, he was busy with other things and she could get to Neverwinter without having to worry about how to hide her pact from Tam or Brin. As long as she kept her sleeves down and she used her sword, they wouldn’t have a reason to think about whether or not she was really a sorcerer.

She wished she knew something about sorcerers. All she was sure of was they didn’t need a spellbook the way wizards did. She chewed her lip. In Neverwinter, it might do to buy a large book and a staff, so that she might pass as a wizard.

But with Brin, she would have to broach the subject eventually. She needed help—as little as she knew about sorcerers, she knew less about other warlocks. If Mehen and Havilar left—*if*, she reminded herself—she needed another ally. She’d have to tell him. She’d never actually told anyone she was a warlock before. No one but Mehen and Havilar. And the village.

He might be afraid. He might run off. If he was learning from a priest, he might do worse.

She watched the back of the Selûnite priest, walking along ahead of her. She remembered enough of him from the attack on the caravan to be worried. Not the sort to pray and wait. If he found out about her pact, what were the chances he would run off? Slim, it seemed, remembering the way his chain had lashed out and struck down an orc with an explosion of silver light.

And Brin was his apprentice. What were the chances he was only learning the chain? Or the casting of rituals? Or … whatever else Selûnites did? Charting the moon?

Farideh almost wished that Lorcan were there. That she could ask him what to do. As much as he made her stomach twist, he did tend to be right. If she could piece off the parts of his advice that didn't aid her and keep the parts that did …

If she could do that, she wouldn't need to find another warlock.

She thought of the way Lorcan had grabbed her arm when Sairché appeared—as if he wasn't going to let go of her, as if he expected someone was going to physically take her away. And he didn't want that. He wanted to keep her close. Close as that night in the winter, his fingertips tracing her brand …

The thought sent a little thrill through her, and she shook her head as if she could fling it from her mind. Havilar was right: they needed to meet more people.

With a little distance, Farideh was certain that everything Lorcan had said and done was for Sairché's sake. Because Sairché was clearly not supposed to know Farideh was Lorcan's warlock.

Just as Farideh was not supposed to know that Sairché might care whether or not she was. All that teasing was just Lorcan leading Farideh astray. Trying to keep her from worrying. But why would he worry about Sairché knowing she was his warlock? Why would it be better for her to think she was his lover?

The sun hung down to the treetops before they reached the edge of Neverwinter Wood. There the trees were thicker—evergreens and birches interspersed with broad-crowned oaks. They were close to the city, but not close enough. They'd have to camp one more night and arrive in the morning.

"We're short on food," Mehen said, shaking out his haversack. "We've waybread enough to get us to the city. But I think you'd all do better with something more substantial. Go bring down some rabbits."

"*Karshoj* to rabbits," Havilar said ripely, once they'd gone a ways into the thick woods. She kneeled beside a break in the brush and pointed at a small pile of droppings. "Let's get a deer."

“A deer?” Brin said. “There are only five of us.”

Havilar looked back over her shoulder and grinned. “You haven’t seen Mehen eat yet.”

Brin stopped walking to stare at Havilar, and Farideh had to laugh. “No, stop, Havi. Mehen doesn’t eat much at all. He says he uses his food better than us. We don’t *need* a deer.”

Havi smiled at her. “But it sure would be fun to take one down.”

“All right,” Farideh said. “But only once. If we miss we go back to pheasants and rabbits. We don’t have time to track a herd through the whole damned forest.”

“*I* only need one try,” Havilar said.

The deer left spoor enough to follow through the evergreens and spry birch saplings. They wound through the trees and around thickets of brambles, until the flora cleared. In a glade nearly a hundred feet across, a herd of half-a-dozen deer grazed on the thick patches of grass, their graceful heads lifting now and again to listen for danger.

Havilar gestured: *Go around. Flush them out.* Farideh nodded once and tugged on Brin’s sleeve, gesturing down the side track. She pressed a finger to her lips, and they started down the trail.

Farideh kept an eye on the deer through the brush and branches. They kept grazing, unaware of the hunters’ approach. They crept around them nearly a quarter mile.

The snap of a branch made Farideh freeze and the deer lift their heads in alarm. Behind her, she heard Brin come to a stop. The deer stared, one-eyed, in their direction.

Damn, Farideh thought. The deer did not return to grazing. Another sound—any sound—and they would flee.

Which was fine, provided they fled in the right direction.

“Brin?” she said, soft as she could. “When I reappear, run at them and keep them headed toward Havi.”

Without waiting for his reply, Farideh pulled Lorcan’s powers into her and she slipped through the folds of the world, bursting free along the herd’s left side. The deer scattered—but because she’d come along the herd’s left flank, at least one veered toward Havilar crouched in the brush. Brin ran at them, keeping the deer from

breaking toward the rear. Two harts zigzagged toward Havilar's hiding place.

"Havi!" Farideh shouted.

She heard the crash of Havilar's glaive …

And then Havilar cursing, and the continuing crash of the tiefling and the hart tearing into the woods.

"Maybe she wounded it?" Brin said, catching up to Farideh.

"Maybe we're eating waybread for supper," she replied. "Come on." They started across the meadow, when a strange growling howl confronted them from the far side. Both froze and Brin's hand went to his sword.

Lumbering out of the woods from the direction they were heading, a beast, heavy with muscle and bristling with brassy feathers, had spotted them. It swung its head, glaring at them with one bright yellow eye, then another, and clacking its beak. It drew back onto its hind legs and screeched again.

"Oh, *karshoj,*" Farideh swore. The owlbear screamed again and her knees buckled, but Brin grabbed her arm and started pulling her away across the glade, away from that spine-chilling scream. The owlbear galloped after them. At the edge of the woods, Farideh turned.

"*Adaestuo.*" The blast screamed across the field and struck the owlbear. It shrieked again but did not slow.

They darted through the birches that grew close together. The owlbear waded in after them, shoving the trees aside. As they rounded a small grove, Farideh turned again and pointed at a sapling.

"*Assulam!*" The tree shattered into chips and pieces. The owlbear kept coming, barreling over the snags of tree and into the cloud of splinters. It pulled up short and screeched, pawing at its eyes and snapping its beak.

Farideh and Brin ran, dodging through the trees, Farideh turning back again and again to cast blasts of energy. The owlbear howled and crashed after them, shouldering aside the saplings that blocked it. If she could set one on fire—

Brin threw up his arm and caught her. Farideh whipped her head around and saw, ahead of them, the ground dropped away into a steep ravine. The floor was a good forty feet below them, the opposite side a crumbling ledge at least as far away. If she'd kept on, she'd be lucky to have broken her legs.

The owlbear broke free of the tangle of birch saplings.

Brin started to pull his sword, but Farideh grabbed his arm. The Hells seeped into her blood with whispering promises and boiling shadows. The layers between the worlds split neatly as flesh beneath a scalpel, and she pulled Brin through. Where they went in those moments, Farideh didn't know, didn't want to know. She kept her eyes shut and focused on landing at the bottom of the ravine.

A gust of biting, hot smoke and they tumbled out of the passage, falling the last ten feet to the ravine floor. The wind went out of Farideh, and she lay on her back trying to catch her breath.

Brin rolled onto his feet and pulled his sword out, glancing around for a moment as if he couldn't tell how he got where he was.

"It's … all right," Farideh panted. She pointed up the cliff. The owlbear was still up there pacing back and forth, stirring up the deadfall, whuffling and hooting.

Brin stared at the cliff a moment, as if waiting for the owlbear to tumble after them and resume the chase. When it continued its frantic pacing and did not, he turned and helped Farideh to her feet.

"That spell comes in useful," he said, catching his breath. "Only I wish it didn't smell so bitter. That and I wish I knew how you managed it."

Farideh looked up the cliff. "I don't think we should climb back up there."

"There should be a way past it," Brin said. "They're territorial, owlbears—we must have crossed into its range. If we walk a little ways along the ravine, it will be safer to climb up." He shook his head and started walking. "Nothing makes you realize the world is a mad place like owlbears. You think they're so silly-looking, and then they're eating your face in strips."

Farideh followed after him. “How do you know all of these things? Owlbears and types of magic and such?”

“Well-rounded education,” Brin said.

“I didn’t know Selûnites studied such things.”

“Who? Oh … right.” He looked at her sidelong. “Listen, please don’t tell Mehen, but … I’m not really Tam’s apprentice. I mean, I agreed to be until we get to Neverwinter, but not for any reason other than I needed blades to travel with. I’m not a Selûnite any more than I’m still Tormish.”

Farideh felt a weight come off her shoulders. “Good! Oh, good.” He gave her another look and she blushed. “I don’t know how to talk to priests.”

“Same as anyone else,” he said with a chuckle. “ ‘Fine afternoon. Do you come to this ravine often?’ ”

She smiled. “ ‘What is your opinion on owlbears?’ ”

Brin chuckled. “Precisely.”

Farideh glanced up at the ravine’s edge again. “Do you think it will go after Havilar?”

“Not if it knows what’s good for it.”

They continued along the ravine for a good quarter hour or more, before the calls of the owlbear faded into the distance, and then they walked farther to make certain it was behind them, before they came upon a scraggly tree clinging to the side of the ravine. Brin, then Farideh, clambered up the tree, then used the rocky outcrops of the ravine wall to pull themselves to the top.

Farideh took a moment to dust her robes off and rub her aching palms where the sharp rocks had scraped the skin. She glanced up at the sun: they’d lost Havilar almost an hour ago. Hopefully, she had the presence of mind to go back to Mehen and Tam instead of coming after Farideh and Brin. Havilar could make an owlbear plenty angry, but Farideh wouldn’t place odds on who would prevail between the two.

“That’s odd,” Brin said. “What do you suppose it is?”

Farideh looked where he was pointing. A tall, silvery-barked oak tree stood in a sparse patch of the forest, away from the firs and birches. The trunk of the tree had been burned with three triangles,

their points nearly touching. The outline of a larger triangle surrounded them, as did a nine-sided shape.

"It's branded on," she said. Her head was getting muzzy. "Do you think it's a message? A sort of warning?"

"No," Brin said. "I mean, they aren't runes of any sort. Not any sort I know." He tilted his head. "Why would someone burn it into a tree? Way out here too."

Farideh didn't know. But something about it *tugged* at her. The way her brand tugged. As if the tree had sent out an invisible vine and wrapped it around her sternum, pulling her nearer. She wanted to touch it, to run her fingers over the charred bark. It would feel alive, she thought.

She also wanted to run, fast and far.

No matter where you run, her thoughts whispered, it will be here. It will remember you.

"Farideh?" Brin's voice sounded thin and distant. "Farideh?"

Why would it remember? she thought. It's only a picture burned on a tree.

"Farideh!"

She reached out a hand toward it, noting—not surprised, merely noting—that the symbol had somehow grown.

No. *She* was closer. She'd walked toward the tree. The brand lay mere inches beneath her palm and—

The portal cracked as it opened. Brin cried out as strong hands seized Farideh from behind, wrenched her away from the tree, and broke the spell. Lorcan spun her around, lifting her off her feet. He all but threw her down and she tumbled to the ground, Lorcan standing between her and the strange tree.

"What in the Hells are you doing?" he roared. Embers swirled and popped around him.

Farideh opened her mouth, but the words wouldn't come. It was as if her mind were spinning—the thoughts wouldn't come together. Her scar screamed with pain, and she stood unevenly.

"You little fool!" Lorcan snarled. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her backward. "You'll get yourself killed!"

Brin's sword scraped against his scabbard.

Farideh found her voice. “Brin, don’t!” Brin bellowed as he threw himself at Lorcan. The cambion turned on Brin.

A gust of fire cast Brin backward into the deadfall, scorching his clothes. He threw up his hands to ward off the devil’s attack. Flames built in Lorcan’s hands to cast again.

“Stop it!” Farideh stepped between them, the burning smoke burgeoning in her own palms. Lorcan’s eyes widened, and for a moment, he looked surprised. Then rage came down over his features again.

“Get out of the way.”

“And then what? Let you burn him alive and leave me to take the blame?”

“Get out of the way or I’ll burn you both!”

“No you won’t!” Farideh snapped. Her arms were shaking, her whole frame was shaking, but of that much she was certain; he wouldn’t dare.

Lorcan bared his teeth in a cruel smile. “I can hurt you without killing you, my darling. I’ll kill him and bring you—”

“No,” she said, “you won’t.” She took a step toward him. “You kill him? I’ll break the pact.”

Lorcan went very still. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

She wet her lips. She thought of naming Tam—surely the priest could do it if she asked. But Lorcan might only swoop in and kill Tam then. Her heart rattled. He could. He probably would. He wasn’t afraid of the priest—

“Sairché,” she blurted.

Lorcan started. “Don’t.”

“I’ll find her.” Farideh felt her cheeks burning, but she dared not back down now. “I’ll find a way. I think your sister might be willing to help me. That’s why you lied, isn’t it? So she wouldn’t know I was your warlock?” The words spilled out, much as she meant to stop them. “It was nothing about … about …”

“Hush,” Lorcan said.

Farideh stepped back, watching for his inevitable temper. It didn’t come. Something she’d said had eased his rage. Lorcan stood, glaring at Brin for a long moment.

“Get up,” he spat. He tried to take Farideh by the hand, but she pulled away. What had taken him down so quickly? she wondered. She had been ready for a fight, and Lorcan’s sudden calm frightened her more.

Lorcan scowled, but beckoned to them both to follow. He led them through the briars and back to the edge of the meadow where they’d lost the hart.

“There,” he said. “That’s your way back. Get back on the road and far from here.”

“Thank you,” Farideh said. She looked back the way they’d come, toward the strange tree. “Lorcan? Those triangles? I didn’t know—”

“Listen to me, darling.” His eyes burned as he looked down at Farideh. “That symbol is dangerous. More dangerous than you have ever … You can’t imagine it. That symbol is your village the day we met a hundred times over, and a hundred times over again, all right?”

Farideh nodded. He spoke quickly. Sternly. But underneath it … his voice shook like a leaf. Whatever it was, he was terrified of the three triangles.

“You see that symbol—on a person, on a tree, on a bloody side of bacon—you run. You can’t run, you hide. You don’t call me. You don’t call on my powers.” He pursed his lips a moment. “Be careful. You’re right. I don’t want you hurt.”

Farideh flushed again, annoyed. “So you suddenly care about me?”

The fear and the rage fled Lorcan’s features and they settled into his familiar smirk. “I take care of all my belongings. I brought you something. Timely, it seems.” As if from nowhere, he withdrew a rod as long as her forearm. Etched all over with the same swirls that made up her scar and tipped with a cloudy gray piece of quartz. As he placed it in her hands, it was as if the connection that brought her spells into being cleared and straightened, the power flowing more easily from its source.

Her scar prickled.

“What is it?”

“A little gift,” Lorcan said. “To keep you safe.”

“Unless the three triangles are around,” she said.

“Unless that.”

She turned the rod over in her hands. “Thank you.”

“I’m sure you’ll return the favor soon enough,” he said. “You’re still heading to Luskan, aren’t you?”

“That direction.”

“Promise me this, Farideh,” he said, tipping her chin up. She stiffened at his touch. “Don’t stop along the way. The cities aren’t safe.”

With that, he vanished.

Brin cleared his throat, and Farideh was surprised to realize she’d forgotten he was there. She flushed to her temples.

“It isn’t what you think.”

“Oh?” Brin said. “Tell me what I think again?”

“Please,” she said, a lump in her throat, “just please, listen. It’s not … I’m not evil. I’m not a devil. I’m not anything like this looks.”

“It looks like you have a pact with a fiend. It looks like you’re not so much a sorcerer as … as a warlock.”

Farideh bit her lip. “Yes, all right, that’s true.”

“So that’s the truth, then?” Brin said. “Why you were cast out of your village?”

“It’s the rest of the truth,” she said. “Taking the pact made the house explode.”

“And you don’t see why that might make people upset?” he said. “You don’t see why they might not want you around? Loyal Torm, I thought you had a little sense.”

She had sense enough to know that this had been bound to happen from the start. She closed her eyes a moment, to quell the fury that felt as if it might burst out of her.

“Brin,” she said, “do you know the most mischievous, troublesome thing I’d ever done before that day?”

Brin hesitated. “No.”

“I taught Havilar all the Draconic swear words I’d picked up from listening in on Mehen and his friends. The most careless thing I’d ever done? I didn’t tell Mehen for a day when Havilar broke her

wrist, because she begged me not to." She opened her eyes and met Brin's. "And I told him anyway when I saw how it had swollen."

"So?"

"So, I wasn't trouble," she said. "I was as good as I could be. I made a mistake. I didn't take the pact because I wanted to misbehave or hurt anyone. It didn't happen because I was troublesome and out of hand. It was a *mistake*, and no matter how bad a mistake, that is not a flaw in me! The only person I hurt was myself."

Brin shook his head slowly. "But you made a pact with a devil. Loyal Fury. How could you? How *could* you?"

"What do you want from me, Brin?" she said hotly. "I'm not like you. I can't just decide to go off into the world and make my way without help."

"There are a lot more ways to get help than offering up your soul."

"He doesn't have my soul," she said. "And even if he did, so what? I'm a tiefling. A soul was never a surety."

"Don't start with that," he said. "This has nothing to do with what you are. It's what you've done."

She laughed bitterly. "Oh? Is that so? Then you think a human girl, an elf girl, Hells, even a dragonborn girl would have gotten the same? That she would have spent her whole *life* doing everything they said, taking every snide comment in stride, and made *one* mistake—one very bad mistake—and had only her sister and her guardian and a devil on her side?" Tears blurred her sight and she turned from Brin to wipe them away. "Not one other person tried to help. Not one other person took my side. Not one pointed out that it might be possible to free me of the pact. You would have thought I'd been wicked right from the cradle the way they responded. He was right," she said half to herself. "He's always right." Farideh looked back at Brin. "*You're* the one with no sense if you think being a tiefling had nothing to do with that."

Brin couldn't quite meet her eye. "You still said yes," he said, more softly. "And … I cannot understand that. Why would you tie yourself to something so evil?"

“He’s … He’s not so bad.” Farideh looked off toward the road, her heart leaden in her chest. “Haven’t you ever just … you want something, anything, to make things different than they are? You’d give anything to just have a little bit of control over your life.”

“So you give someone else control?” Brin stopped himself. The tightness around his eyes relaxed. “Maybe,” he said after a moment.

“Perhaps there are other ways,” she said. “And I would consider them if they came along. But that day, my choices were to be crushed under the weight of the world’s expectations or … to take a little bit of control from a devil.”

“You’re playing with very dangerous powers—”

“I know what I’m ‘playing with,’ ” she said. “And you’ve seen me use those powers. I saved you. I stopped those orcs. I’m not … I don’t hurt people unless I have to. Does it count for anything that I use the powers he gives me for good things?”

“Yes,” Brin said after a moment, “for you. But you’re taking the powers of the Hells. You’re not going to convince me those aren’t purely evil.” He looked back at the spot where Lorcan had stood. “And him …”

“Lorcan,” she said. “His name’s Lorcan.”

“Loyal Fury,” Brin said. “You can’t tell me he’s safe.”

“He’s safe enough. Mehen doesn’t like him. But he’s never brought me to harm.”

“Yet,” Brin said.

“It’s a tool,” she said. “I can use the pact to protect people. To help people. It’s better than my damned sword.”

“Even if it is like a sword,” Brin said. “It can still hurt you. *He* can still hurt you.”

As if she hadn’t heard that before. As if she hadn’t thought it herself. Farideh shook her head. “I know what I’m doing.”

Brin didn’t have a response to that. He shook his head again, as if he didn’t like the way their conversation had gone.

“Does he always … overreact like that? Push you around?”

“No,” Farideh said. She thought again of the symbol and the way it pulled at her. “Something frightened him.”

“That’s a funny way to be frightened,” Brin said. “Do Havilar and Mehen know he treats you that way?”

“Let’s just go back to the camp,” Farideh said. She started toward the other side of the meadow, then turned to Brin. “Don’t tell anyone. Please. Especially not Tam.”

“Why would you think I’d do something like that? I don’t like your pact, but I’m not going to get you in trouble.”

“I … don’t,” she said. “Not specifically. I’m just worried he’ll find out.” She rolled the rod between her hands. “There’s something strange about him.”

Brin stopped. “Strange how?”

She shrugged. “He’s always watching, as if he’s trying to figure something out. Mehen trusts him—which is pretty strange too.” She sighed. “I am really sorry I didn’t tell you. I don’t … I don’t ever know how to bring it up.”

Brin sighed too. “I know better than you think. I mean,” he added quickly, “not that all the running away is as dangerous as it is to admit you’re a warlock with an infernal pact.” He wet his lips. “Do you hate all priests?”

“The woman who led the call to kick me out of the village was a priestess of Chauntea,” she said. “A tiefling too.”

“She’s not every priest.”

“I’ve yet to meet one who thought much at all of me. I don’t trust them. I can’t trust them when I don’t know what to expect from them.” She kicked the deadfall. “When common knowledge is that you haven’t got a soul worth saving, it tends to make them do things I’d rather they not.”

“I think you have a soul,” Brin offered.

“You also think we’ll believe your hair is really that color,” Farideh pointed out. “Even when you’re sweating brown. Let’s get back to camp.”

Lorcan released the charm and with it, the invisibility that had cloaked him fell away. He watched as Farideh and Brin disappeared

into the forest on the other side of the meadow, holding firm against the rage that threatened to overtake him and drive him out across the field where he could rip that little shit's head right off. He supposed, with a certain studied calm, that was his mother's blood coming through.

And Farideh …

She hadn't listened to the boy. Not then. But if Brin stayed around much longer, he would keep talking and cajoling and arguing. He'd wear her down the way Lorcan couldn't seem to.

It probably wouldn't take much, Lorcan thought, considering how she'd threatened to go to Sairché. She was pulling away, stepping out of her proper place. Listening to Mehen. Treating Lorcan like something she could set aside.

Like a tool. Like her sword.

She's not as lamb-brained as you think she is either, he mused. The most difficult warlock in his retinue by far.

If only Lorcan could have snatched Farideh up and left Brin standing dumbstruck in the forest, so close to one of the groves of the Ashmadai, the proud and bloodthirsty cultists of Asmodeus.

Lords, how Lorcan had panicked when he'd seen her reaching for the sign of Asmodeus. If he hadn't been scrying, she might have been lured into the Ashmadai's hands. Whatever they did next, he'd have lost his Kakistos heir for certain. He ran his fingers through his hair. Lost her in a bloody, bloody fashion. The residual magic of a hundred sacrifices packed those groves. They didn't play nicely with other archdevils' pawns either.

Ashmadai in Neverwinter Wood, he thought. The archduchess's only agent in Neverwinter, his mother had said. And Glasya was doing something her father shouldn't know about.

Stop thinking about it, he admonished. He didn't want to puzzle it out. He didn't want to stumble on the answer. But he needed to know enough to keep Farideh safe.

"She won't go to Neverwinter," he said. "She's going to Luskan." He smiled. "And the little nit will be dead by morning."

Vartan, Rohini thought, was no Brother Anthus.

In the midst of one of his interminable lectures, the half-elf poured her a glass of zzar, and Rohini smiled and thanked him. Inwardly, she was twisting with an impatience to rival Invadiah's, but outwardly she had a face to maintain.

"So the question is obvious," Vartan said. "Why might a god like Helm's mantle be taken up by another, while a god like Mystra's portfolio is left untouched?"

"That is a good question," Rohini said. He did not want her opinion. He wanted her to listen to his. It left her plenty of time to study Vartan for weak points.

Rohini had come to Neverwinter with a simple task: corrupt Brother Anthus, the Sovereignty's darling, and turn him into a tool for Glasya's cause. Don't ask what the cause is, just make him amenable the way she knew best, and await further orders. She'd remade herself a stern and capable healer—pretty, but the sort who doesn't notice or worry about her prettiness. The sort a certain kind of man felt clever for noticing.

Anthus had noticed. He'd brought her into his circle, shared his wisdom with her, drawn her into his confidences. Not even Invadiah could have complained of her progress, and none of it had required more magic than the shapeshifting. Rohini was the best, after all.

She picked up the glass of zzar and swirled the pale liquor.

Anthus had been an older man, his hair thin and silver and his face gaunt, but his appetites robust and his eyes sharp. It was not such a lie that her little nurse might find the good brother attractive enough to bed.

Rohini suspected not even the devils knew, but abed with a succubus, one was cracked open, vulnerable as a sacrifice pinned to an altar. In Anthus's arms she'd seen his thoughts, his fears, the truth of his connection to the Sovereignty. She ran a tongue over her lips. Nothing as exhilarating as digging your hands into someone's secret heart.

Afterward, Anthus had poured glasses of zzar, sat down in his chair, looked her in the eye, and said, "I know you, succubus."

Rohini had acted hurt, that he should call her such a name. But he went on. “You’re not the first to come to Neverwinter,” he said. “I’ll wager you knew that one. You wouldn’t go around with that hair otherwise.”

He swirled the zzar in his glass, oblivious to the challenge he was laying on her. Rohini pulled her magic to her, prepared to cast the net of her domination, when Anthus spoke again.

“Arunika,” he said, and her spell shattered into pieces. “That was her name. Herzgo’s redheaded slut.”

Had Glasya known? Rohini had wondered, and still wondered. Had Invadiah? Had they sent her because her sister had fled the Hells and holed up here in Neverwinter? Had Arunika been one of the failed scouts? Had they sent Rohini to find her or did they already know she’d find nothing?

“Where is she?” Rohini had asked.

“Dead of course,” Anthus said, and she realized for the first time how cruel and cold his eyes were, how empty. “Silly bitch hitched her wagon to the wrong man.”

Which, Anthus would later have admitted, had he voice to, was the wrong thing to say.

Rohini stared into the glass of zzar she held, while Vartan expounded on dead gods and dead ways. She had removed Anthus’s body, rearranging things to make it clear one of the dreadful creatures of the Chasm had killed him—after all, what else would dismember a body so?—as he took a walk through the less protected part of town. The Lord Protector ordered more patrols to beat back the Chasm’s horrors. Rohini made herself distraught and clung to Anthus’s colleagues, searching for a likely replacement. She had chosen Vartan because he was eager and a little desperate, but also a little rash.

But it wasn’t enough. Her mission was still in peril. Killing Anthus had been the greatest mistake she had ever made.

No—not a mistake. A flaw. She had killed Anthus because she wasn’t wholly a devil. Not yet. The rage that had seized her when Anthus taunted Rohini—called her sister a silly bitch—had made the erinyes’ cold fury look like a tantrum. It had been imprudent. It had

been a passion of the moment. But it had sated something dark and frenzied that curled around the core of Rohini, that mad, demon spark the devils always whispered about.

I will not do so again, Rohini swore to herself. She would not end as Arunika had, a slave to her no-longer-constant nature. She was a devil now. She could become anything she wished if she played their game long enough.

"Have you discovered," she asked Vartan, "how the … masters of the Chasm fit into this mystery?"

Vartan stopped, stunned that she'd interrupted him. He flushed. "Well. It's not so simple is it? They are … well, we aren't sure what they are, are we? Only that Anthus believed they were there, and so do … *does* the gentleman from before." He waved a hand. "I'm beginning to believe there are much worthier areas of consideration. The Order of Blue Fire, for example …"

Rohini smiled tightly and let him go on again. Vartan was certainly no Anthus. When she'd killed him, Anthus had already been well-corrupted by the Abolethic Sovereignty. He'd had their secrets and a modicum of their trust, but also a strange power that made him speak in riddling prophecy on occasion. It hadn't helped him see Rohini's blades. Vartan had come to her a blank slate.

Whatever mortals liked to believe of themselves, Rohini knew a pretty face and a warm body weren't the keys to a true seduction. Often enough with other succubi—sloppy, overeager ones like Arunika had been—that might be all the effort they put forth. Simple, satisfying, but not particularly convincing—a pretty face only worked longer than a night on the weakest sorts, and whatever mortals believed about themselves, most of them were not so desperate as that.

No, to truly seduce someone away from the path they'd made themselves took cunning and skill, took attention to detail and to the subtle shades of other people's hopes and fears. Vartan might have been a lonely scholar of a man, and Arunika could have gotten him in bed and all his secrets out in the span of breaths. But Rohini didn't need secrets: she needed action. She needed someone who

desperately wanted to impress her, to surpass her. Pull the right levers and he'd do everything she needed without being told.

That plan didn't please Invadiah at all.

"You have three days," she'd said. "And if you do not have the aboleth for me, I will hand you back to Glasya and take care of matters myself." And end up, Rohini thought, with a score of dead or spellscarred erinyes and a riled pack of aboleths, the ancient creatures that lurked in the depths of the Chasm.

Why Glasya wanted one of the giant, tentacled monsters from beyond, Rohini didn't know. It was the sort of secret she knew better than to know. For all Rohini cared, Glasya wanted a new mount and thought a slime-coated tentacle-whale would do nicely.

Lords of the Hells, she *hoped* that was Glasya's plan. When she'd been sent into Neverwinter, she'd merely been told to corrupt Anthus. Then to corrupt Vartan and to get him to tell her everything he knew about the Chasm. Then it became find out everything he knew about the aboleths. Then it was to goad him into gathering more information and putting himself into the circle of the Abolethic Sovereignty's proxies, their mind-controlled servitors.

Now it was to get Invadiah an aboleth.

With every step, Invadiah's words and actions spelled one thing very clearly: this mission was a gamble. If everything went well, Rohini and Invadiah both might be promoted.

If the wrong person found out, they were all in a great deal of trouble. And since the archduchess herself had set things in motion, the "wrong person" could only be another archdevil.

She drained her wine and dabbed at her mouth, staring down Vartan. He would *not* become useless to her now. Not with Invadiah breathing down her neck, not with everything breaking down and everyone ready to look for a scapegoat.

"You seem …" She held the pause for long enough that she seemed uncertain and worried. "Preoccupied. I do hope the, ah, gentleman didn't trouble you yesterday."

"Oh," Vartan said. "No … No more than usual."

"Vartan," she said, her mouth stern, but her eyes soft—pleading even. "I don't appreciate being lied to."

“What?” he said. “Whyever would you think I’ve been lying to you?”

“I had thought,” she said, “I had *hoped*. That we were carrying on Anthus’s work *together*. But that isn’t so. You see me as a hindrance. As a nuisance.” She forced her lower lip forward in a pout so slight he would think it unintentional. The force of her feelings.

“No! No, not at all,” he said. He laid a hand on hers, the guilt in his gray eyes exactly what she was aiming for. “You’re right, I am distracted. Anthus’s … work is more complex than I expected, and points in different directions. But I assure you no one thinks you’re a hindrance.”

“Has the Sovereignty turned you away?” she said.

Vartan startled. That had him, she thought. “How do you know that name?” he demanded.

Rohini made sure her eyes sparkled with admiration as she said, “You ask me how? I learned from the most intelligent man on the Sword Coast and you ask me how?” She clasped her hand over his and held him there. “A bit of information here, a careless word there, a feverish tale told too loudly at a tavern. It’s true then? What they say? That they are creatures of astonishing knowledge?”

Vartan eyed her a moment. “You mustn’t go around speaking of this. It could be dangerous.”

“I’ve spoken to no one but you, I swear it. But that is … that is who Anthus was speaking to.”

Vartan didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. Rohini knew his part almost as well as her own, and didn’t need any cues to say all the right things.

“You are … brilliant, Vartan,” she said earnestly. “Wiser, I sometimes think, than Anthus ever was. And if their agents have not realized it and taken you into their confidence, then it is *their* blindness and nothing more.”

“You are kind,” he said. “But courting the Sovereignty is not akin to gaining a lordling’s attention. Even their servants are wiser than most people dream of. They know things … Even the weak-willed servitors they craft know things I cannot. My approaches have not been favored.”

Of course they hadn't—Vartan had no doubt been coy and subtle as an old maid. Rohini sighed. "Would that there were some way, somehow, that you might channel your knowledge, your theories of the Chasm and the planes, into something grand. Something to astound them and make them take notice. Something to make them realize all they have lost by not hearing you!"

"I very much doubt the Sovereignty has any interest in curing spellplague, or reviving the gods."

Rohini's smile was small and sad, but inside, she felt like a wolf with bared teeth, gloating over a kill.

"I suppose they'd rather you infect people to get their attention," she said offhandedly. A poor jest. A comment without any thought at all behind it. A comment that sparked something in Vartan's thoughts.

He gave her a considered look. "That … Perhaps. They want servants to walk abroad for them, I believe. Improving them would doubtless please the Old Ones."

"Stronger," Rohini said, her voice high with wonder, "cleverer, faster, and imbued with spellscars. They would be well-protected by such, considering the fear of the Chasm."

"Precisely." Vartan turned to her, his features troubled still. "I … it would be dangerous. The odds—"

"You could, Vartan," Rohini said. Passionate here, she thought. A touch overbold. Spread it thick. She laid a hand over his. "If anyone could, it is you. You are the wisest man I have ever known. Or ever will, I suspect."

"You flatter me. There is so much I don't know. They have reason to turn me away …"

Rohini nearly snarled—ages of this, and suddenly, Vartan was humble? To the Hells with subtlety. She thrust the domination over him.

"Harness what they have not," she said, pulling the charm tighter, "and they cannot deny you are worthy of their knowledge. Their minds may be great, but they do not understand what it is that mortals fear—only they come upon it by their nature. Your

servitors would show you can supply what they lack. In exchange for their knowledge of the rift. How to harness the rift."

"You speak of madness," he said, but there was no reprobation in his voice. He wanted to be convinced.

"I speak of your destiny," Rohini said, letting the net of her charm close around him completely. "You were not made to play nursemaid to the Lord Pretender's guards. I have seen your and Anthus's notes, I have seen your work. You know how to all but guarantee a spellscar, and keep the infected from dying." She placed her mouth close to his ear. "And I know how to make certain it inspires loyalty." She kissed him, and like countless others before him, Brother Vartan was lost.

"And I will aid you," Rohini said, as Brother Vartan nodded to her words like the puppet he was. "I will gather the army that it will take to prove to the Sovereignty you are worthy of their secrets."

And get Invadiah, she thought, her damnable aboleth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

South of Neverwinter

11 Kythorn, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

Farideh and Brin did not speak until they reached the camp. The sun had set and Mehen and Tam were strapping on their armor by the firelight. Havilar paced—already armed and armored—her face drawn and pale. When she saw her sister and Brin break through into the clearing, she dropped her glaive and rushed at them.

"Gods!" she cried. "There you are! What happened? I lost you!"

"Nothing," Farideh said. "We just got separated."

"Right," Brin said, too quickly. "Just a little turned around." Havilar stared at both of them.

"You got a little turned around?" Havilar said, her voice slipping into a panicked pitch. "I didn't know where you were. You might have been lost!"

"We weren't," Farideh said, waving her off.

"We were for a little bit," Brin said. "But we're fine."

"And even if we were," Farideh said, "you couldn't have done anything about it that we didn't already do."

"She might have killed the owlbear," Brin admitted.

"Owlbear?" Havilar shrieked.

Farideh pursed her lips. "Thank you, Brin. All right, you might have killed the owlbear that chased us, but we got away. Everything's fine."

"Everything is *not* fine, and don't you dare pretend it is!"

"Calm down," Farideh said. "You're getting upset about nothing."

Havilar's cheeks turned red. "You think you're the only one who matters? You think you're the only one who gets to worry about

anyone? First you throw yourself out into the middle of that fight and then—"

"Oh for the Hells' sake," Farideh snapped. "Havi, we're fine!"

"Oh course you're fine," Havilar retorted. "*Lorcan* was watching out for you, wasn't he?" She turned to Brin. "She lied before. She's not a sorcerer."

Brin flushed. "I … I, um …"

"Gods damn it, Havi, he *knows*, all right? Calm down and stop shouting." Farideh's chest tightened and she was all too aware of Tam, standing at the far side of the camp. "You're embarrassing both of us."

But Havilar kept her eyes on Brin. "Did she tell you I was the one who called him? That she snatched him up from me? I'll bet she didn't. I'll bet—"

"Gods, Havi, stop it! You're being jealous. No one left you behind."

Havilar shoved her. "*You're* being a *henish*. We're supposed to be a team."

"That's a fair thing to say when you're calling me a *henish!*" She pushed Havilar's arm away, the shadow-smoke boiling up around her—

"Knock it off!" Mehen shouted. He seized both by the shoulders and yanked them apart. "You two are acting like a pair of hatchlings."

"But she—"

"I don't want to hear it," he said. "Havilar, you need to calm down. You're upsetting yourself, and saying things you and I both know you don't mean. Farideh's fine, you're fine, everything's all right."

"And you," he said turning to Farideh, "need to snap out of it. You scared your sister, whether you meant to or not, and that deserves a little kindness. *And need I remind you,*" he added, dropping his voice and switching to Draconic, "*that bloody devil is supposed to stay away from you.*"

"*I know. He just came. I couldn't do anything.*"

"You *told me he would stay away—so why does Brin know? Were you showing off?*"

"*No*! *I* can't *call him,*" she said. "*He's not like a trained dog. He just shows up.*" She paused. "He *said we shouldn't go to Neverwinter. There was something—*"

"*We're not changing plans now. Especially not because* karshoji *Lorcan said so.*"

"*He was trying to warn us. Like with the orcs. He was worried—*"

"*Worried about causing enough trouble.*" Mehen said. "*We're taking Tam and Brin to Neverwinter. That's it. And if I hear another word about Lorcan, I'll—*"

"*You'll what?*" Farideh shouted. "*Leave me in the woods back where you found me? Maybe you can find some other daughter who isn't such a disappointment.*"

Mehen threw back his head and roared, his sharp teeth bared. Farideh took a step back.

"*Enough*!" Mehen looked back over his shoulder, to Tam and Brin and Havilar who was watching wide-eyed, and switched back to Common. "This is the watch order—the priest, me, Havi, Farideh, Brin. If you're not Tam, eat your waybread and go to bed. And you," he said to Farideh, "I don't want to hear another word from you until we've both calmed down, understand?"

Farideh nodded tightly and brushed past Mehen to find a spot away from all of them. Her cheeks were burning, and she would have liked to curl up and vanish. It was a cruel thing to say to Mehen, but … it was only the truth. It was clear he'd rather have two of Havilar. It was clear she'd be better off if they did part ways once they reached Neverwinter, and so would Mehen.

Mehen lay awake and staring up at the cold stars, biding his time until the priest was ready to change shifts and turning Farideh's words over and over in his thoughts, as if there were some way to see it that didn't stick in his throat.

How could she think that? How could she believe he thought she was a disappointment? He wasn't disappointed in her … just in her decisions, and that was simple enough to fix. She just wouldn't. Too bad Farideh was as stubborn as a mule in mud.

Mehen could still recall Farideh at the age of six wearing too-small boots long into the sweltering summer, because she'd adored the rabbit fur trim. Mehen had laughed at her willfulness, and she'd been angry then, too.

But Lorcan was no pair of boots, and Mehen couldn't slip into her room one night and throw him in the midden. He tapped on the roof of his mouth, anxious and irritated. If she'd had a room for him to find that devil in, he'd do worse than throw the bastard in the rubbish heap.

Mehen sat up. He wasn't going to sleep, so he might as well not pretend. He picked up his sword and strode across the camp to the tree where Tam sat, his chain uncoiled in a sinuous line across the dirt. The priest watched, but only nodded as Mehen sat down and laid the falchion across his lap.

"You can take your turn sleeping, if you like," Mehen said, staring at the fire.

"In a bit," Tam said. "I don't sleep a great deal these days. Might as well sit watch."

"You don't have some sort of …" Mehen waved a hand vaguely at the moon. "Rituals to attend to."

Tam chuckled. "It's not as formal as all that. She won't forget me if I don't make offerings for a night."

"You gave her offerings enough in orc blood, eh?"

"Well, no. That's not my lady's taste."

Mehen examined the serpentine curve of the chain. A dark patina coated every link, and only the spikes—sharpened not too long ago, he suspected—gleamed in the firelight.

He looked up at Tam. "Thought your sort preferred a staff. Or somesuch."

Tam shrugged. "A relic," he said. "From a previous life. I was a blade-for-hire. As it turns out, the chain plays well with the Moonmaiden's magic." He nodded at Mehen's falchion. "Abeiran?"

“The design, not the blade,” Mehen said. “It was made for me in Tymanther.” He turned the blade over. “Meant for a lance defender honor guard, but no one makes things for ornament only in Djerad Thymar. It’s served me well.” He did not offer more, and the priest, to his credit, didn’t ask.

But Tam did say, “It’s not easy living in a world where the rules are all different than what you know. It’s taken me fifteen years to stop thinking everyone’s going to run me through the minute I turn my back.”

Mehen nodded. “Like learning how to walk and talk all over again.”

“Much the same, I suspect.” The silence stretched on before Tam spoke again. “What is it keeping you awake?”

“Unfinished arguments.”

“Ah. Well, you probably did the best you could, ending it there.”

Mehen tapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “You don’t have children. You don’t know.”

“I do, actually,” Tam said. “A daughter. She’s … let’s see, twenty-four now? Lives in Baldur’s Gate, making ends meet as an antiquary and historian.”

Mehen fought back a sneer. Such a human assertion. “*Kosjmyrni*. Her mother’s daughter.”

“I suppose,” Tam said with an easy smile, “if you want to look at it like a dragonborn, then yes. But I’ve made it a point to know Mira. And we’ve had our share of arguments.” He nodded at the fire, at Farideh and Havilar’s sleeping forms. “How old are they?”

Mehen shrugged. “Based off the midwife’s guess, seventeen. We’ll say eighteen once Mirtul rolls around.”

“It gets hard around then,” Tam said. “They’re grown women. It doesn’t suit well to send them to bed without supper or dress them down in front of their comrades.”

Mehen growled, low in his throat at the subtle judgment. “You don’t know my girls. Don’t make guesses about what they need.”

Tam shrugged again, seemingly unconcerned with the threat. “It’s how it is. They want your approval still—”

“And they get it,” he said. When they’re not being impossible.

“But they don’t *need* it anymore.” Tam stood and gathered up his chain. “Again, I don’t mean offense. You’ll do as you will, but make no mistake: they’ll grow up whether you like it or not. You can let them find their own ways, or you can keep them reined in and find out too late you’ve done them a great disservice.”

Didn’t mean offense, bah! Mehen glared at the priest’s back as he retreated to his own bedroll. Every day of the twins’ lives brought someone new telling Clanless Mehen he didn’t know how to raise his own daughters.

When he’d found them, coming back to Arush Vayem from a long hunt, no one in the village had wanted to take them in. Tieflings—twin tieflings—well, that was unlucky. And one with an odd eye, like a feytouched dog? Well, no one needed a priest of Beshaba to interpret those signs. The goddess of ill-fortune might as well have left her thumbprint right between the bumps of their budding horns.

It had broken Mehen’s heart, the way they’d all averted their eyes, claimed to have too many responsibilities, too many mouths to feed, too little knowledge of babies. Mehen couldn’t have his own offspring, outcast as he was, and he hadn’t been afraid.

He looked across the fire at Farideh’s sleeping form.

He wouldn’t trade a hundred eggs for her, even if she tried his patience, even if she pushed him to the brink of his temper, even if she refused to listen and contradicted him and thought she knew better when Mehen knew she didn’t. But if she came to harm because of Lorcan, Mehen would never forgive himself.

After all, he had raised her better than that.

I should tell her so, Mehen thought. Both of those things.

Seventeen. He had only been a year or so older when he’d taken them in. Younger when he’d been renounced by Clan Verthisathurgiesh, and left the capitol of Djerad Thymar to find a new home in Arush Vayem.

But that was different. He was dragonborn. At their age, he’d have been an adult in his clan’s eyes for several years—wedded and with at least one clutch of eggs hatched—and leaving Tymanther, losing the mate and the eggs, didn’t change that.

Tieflings grew more slowly. At three, a dragonborn was half-grown. At three, the twins had still been trying to master Common.

And at seventeen, they weren't old enough to know what they needed. Mehen still knew what was best for them.



Wyssin, Lorcan knew, wasn't an easy herb to sample. Especially for mortals. His sisters praised the way it strengthened their senses and sped up their reactions. Lorcan had pilfered a pinch or two before deciding it wasn't to his tastes. It made every sound flare like a torch, every scrap of light sharp as a needle. The mind raced and the muscles twitched. Lorcan knew better than to get in his sisters' way before a raid, if they had the stuff—any one of them might run him through before they even realized he was there.

So when the arrow punched through the edge of his left wing as he landed beside the small, smoky campfire, Lorcan wasn't entirely surprised. Goruc sat huddled in the dark, assaulted, no doubt, by a thousand tiny noises from a thousand different directions. His hands shook as he set another arrow to his bow.

"I see you've been experimenting," Lorcan said dryly. He winced, pushed the arrow through, and examined the bloodied tip. "Though, thankfully, not with the poison. Get your blades ready."

"What for?" Goruc said. "You want to fight me? I could take you. I *will* take you." He threw down the bow and reached for his axe.

"Heavens and Hells—no." Why did he always pick the excitable ones? "Your quarry is near. They're about an hour's ride from here, right off the road. Go now, and you'll catch them in the dark."

"I've been running after them all day long," Goruc said. "I need to sleep."

Lorcan smiled. "But you and I both know you can't rest while the wyssin is flogging your mind. Might as well take care of things now."

Goruc blinked at him rapidly—Lorcan was only half-mortal, and he knew well how the wyssin made his thoughts race. Someone like

Goruc's mind was likely to come apart if Lorcan gave him too much to think about.

"Go north. Along the road. Give yourself a little more of the devilweed and you should have no problems finding the boy and the dragonborn." He smiled. "I'll check in on you once you're finished." He'd come through the portal near their camp in an hour or so. The boy would be dead, so would Mehen. He'd convince Farideh to come away from the Ashmadai and Rohini, and she'd trust him even more because she'd have to.

Goruc sneered. "Check on me? I'll give him something to check on."

"Yes, yes," Lorcan said, waving a dismissive hand. "Don't forget your blades."

Goruc sneered at him, tensed as if he were about to attack anyway. He opened the vial and carefully dripped a line of the viscous liquid along his axe blade. A fringe of steam rose off the metal where the poison landed and dried almost instantly. He carefully slipped the weapon into its holster and repeated the process on the tips of each of his arrows.

Finally, Goruc pulled out his dagger with a trembling hand. Before poisoning it, he dragged the tip down his face from forehead to chin, skimming lightly over the eyelid. Blood ran down his face and into his eye.

"What in the Hells are you doing?" Lorcan asked.

"Mourning scar," Goruc grunted. "The blood washes the weakness from my sight. The pain reminds me of my dead." He scowled at Lorcan. "The ones your witch killed."

Lorcan smiled and opened the portal of the Needle of the Crossroads. "Let that one go. She's very well-armed these days."

There was a moment—only a moment—when Farideh woke, where her mind was empty, her thoughts still, when she might be anyone but herself. An elf in the woods, a sailor on the Sea of Fallen Stars, a genasi general, or just a regular human girl stirring in a regular bed

in Waterdeep. When she might not know Lorcan or Havilar or Mehen or anyone else whose raw and jagged feelings were turned against her.

But then she blinked, the world solidified, and she was who she was.

And Havilar was nudging her ungently with one boot.

" 'S your watch," she hissed. "Get *up.*"

"I'm awake," Farideh said, sitting up and throwing off her cloak. The fire still crackled low in the pit. The dark shapes of Mehen, Brin, and Tam, still fast asleep on the ground, made a sort of broken wall around the site.

"I was shaking you forever," Havilar said, tromping back to the tree she'd been standing watch beside and retrieving her glaive. "You have to take your turn you know."

"I'm *up!*" Farideh pulled her leather jack on. "What is wrong with you?"

"Me? Nothing. I'm surprised you care all of the sudden."

Farideh picked up the rod Lorcan had given her and turned it over in her hands. It didn't feel like anything other than a stick of polished wood—except for the way it made it seem so much simpler to grasp the powers that fueled her spells—but considering the source it might be a gift she would always be grateful for or it might be a curse she'd spend all her life wishing she hadn't accepted.

"Gods, Havi, you were scared for all of a few minutes. Let it lie."

"You could have been *dead*."

"Even if that were so, I'm the one who was lost in the godsdamned woods."

Havilar shook out her blanket and laid it on the ground beside the fire with excessive care. "You weren't even sorry," she muttered, after she'd smoothed it out, "You're *never* sorry."

Farideh's annoyance boiled over and it took all of her effort to keep her voice low. "Fine," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got lost. I'm sorry I got chased by an owlbear and didn't wait for you to kill it. I'm sorry Lorcan finally showed up and practically scared the piss out of Brin. I'm sorry I didn't stay lost so you could tear your hair

and beat your breast and wail on and on about how upset you are—oh wait, no." She gestured at her sister with the rod. "You seem to be quite capable of that one. You think I'm never sorry? I'm sorry every godsdamned day, so let this one stupid thing go. You got scared."

"That's not all of it and you know it," Havilar shot back. "First you took Lorcan and now you're taking Brin."

"Taking Brin? He's not a pet—he can make his own decisions."

"You know what I mean."

"You think we were off having a tryst? I'm not even fond of him," Farideh said. Then sense overcame her temper, and she looked at Havilar with new eyes. "Oh. Are *you* fond of him?"

"No!"

Farideh swallowed. "Are you fond of Lorcan?"

"That's *not* it."

"Then what is it, Havi? I can't read your mind."

Havilar crossed her arms. "You're just …" she started. She turned away and tried again. "You're going off with all these boys just because they give you things and talk to you, and you leave me behind with Mehen like something you don't even want around anymore. I'm your *sister*. Doesn't that matter?"

Farideh took a deep breath to calm herself. Concentrate every one of their arguments, and at the core, it was all about Havilar. It was always about Havilar.

"First, two people is not 'all these boys.' Second, *you* ran off without *me* the other night so how is it different? Third—"

But she never got to her third point.

A horrible, hollow sound interrupted her. Havilar cried out and fell back a step, clutching her midsection. Again the sound came, and Havilar started to fall, the shafts of arrows protruding from her stomach and ribs.

Farideh screamed—her sister's name or just an animal howl? She couldn't tell. Her senses were too full of the blackness of Havilar's blood welling through her fingers, the whimpered pants Havilar made as Farideh caught her and slowed her fall. The uninterrupted dark beyond the campfire where the arrows had come from. The

powers of the Hells beating her pulse for her, pouring their venom and flame and miasmas through her and into the etched rod she couldn't loosen her fingers from.

A branch rustled and Farideh thrust the rod toward it. A blast of bruised light lit the forest beyond, sizzling with a sickly perfume. It lit the face of an orc for a moment before it struck him. Heavy brows. Deliberate scars on his forehead. A bow and an ugly notched axe. His eyes were hungry and fierce when he looked back at Farideh.

Him, she thought, not knowing where she knew the orc from, but knowing, certain, she had to kill him. He would kill Havi if she didn't. He would kill Farideh if she didn't.

She swept the rod forward and released a fiery bolt of magic toward the figure. The rod made the flame brighter, closer, hotter. It seared the orc as he approached and sent him scampering back.

Behind her, Mehen and Tam and Brin were awake and on their feet. She dimly heard Mehen's bellowed orders, Tam's clanking chain. The orc was charging at her through the brush. Let him, she thought, the pulse of the Hells whispering to her of vengeance, of protection.

There was hardly a need to pull—the powers were simply there, ready and waiting. She could see the lines of her veins, black and bulging, as the engines of Malbolge fed her. A storm of brimstone rained out of the air and shattered in sparks all around the orc. She saw in the flash of the spell, the priest leap backward to avoid the rain.

Mehen was shouting at her to stop, to let them pass, but she paid him no heed. It was her and the orc. She slashed the rod across her, and a wave of rotten-smelling heat roiled away and toward her prey.

The orc rolled under it, and came up much closer than Farideh expected. So close she could see the red line of poison dripping down the edge of his axe. Mehen shouted and she could hear him running toward her. Someone was praying loudly—Tam.

Farideh raised the rod, hoping to loose another fire bolt at him before the axe could fall.

Instead, a whole wall of fire exploded outward. It caught the orc as he started to swing the axe and flung him away like a rag doll into the pitch-dark night. Mehen and Tam barreled past her into the darkness of the forest.

Farideh shouted. She dropped the rod in surprise.

"*M'henish,*" she swore hoarsely. What in the Hells had that been? There was no answer—only the crashing of Mehen and Tam barreling through the forest and the crackle of smoldering brush where the flames had passed.

"Fari," Havilar whimpered.

"Oh gods," Farideh cried, and she dropped to her knees beside her sister.

The arrows had buried themselves deeply in Havilar's gut.

Fatal, she thought, Mehen's voice lecturing them about caring for wounds. Fatal, always fatal without healing.

Farideh reached for her belt, but the healing potion was missing. She grasped at the belt, it had to be there—then remembered, no, she'd given it to someone else's sister to save someone else from an arrow wound.

"Mehen!" she screamed. "Mehen!" But there was nothing for Mehen to do. Tam could do something. Tam could do healing. "Tam!"

Havilar raised a hand and grasped at her own belt. Havilar had a healing potion too, Farideh remembered. She clutched alongside Havilar's hands, trying to find it in the dark, among the pouches and buckles and blood. Their four hands closed on it, pried it loose. Farideh took it, but her fingers slipped on the cap—why couldn't she grab it?

Brin was there, kneeling beside her. Where had he come from? Where had he *been?* She kept twisting at the cap, but Brin took the vial from her, and only then did Farideh notice her hands were slippery with Havilar's blood.

Brin cracked the vial and poured half over Havilar's wound, and half down her throat. She coughed and bits of the yellowish potion came back up, as well as a gout of her blood. Her eyes were terrified, and she clutched Farideh's shaking hands in her own.

The wounds started to heal, the blood slowed … but it didn't stop. No magic pushed the arrows back from Havilar's ruined gut. The healing wasn't working.

"Poisoned," Brin said. "We have to get the arrows out. Do you know how to do that?"

"She'll bleed to death," Farideh said, the words coming out in a rush. "You don't take the arrows out because she'll bleed to *death*."

"No," Brin said, "I promise she won't. Just get the arrows out."

Farideh blinked back tears and nodded. Please be right, she thought. Please don't let the last thing I said to Havilar be such a stupid, *pothac* argument. She crawled to her haversack and took out her knife, hoping it was sharp enough.

Havilar's eyes were wild with pain and terror and shock. Brin held one hand behind her head, telling her to stay awake, to hold on.

Farideh could not look at her sister as she sliced into Havilar's belly. Short strokes, small cuts, just enough to loosen the barb and pry out the arrow. The blood was gushing up now, over skin and yellow fat. She'd avoided the gushing vessels, but there was so much blood still and it was all over her. Still, she cut and wept, while Havilar whimpered.

She pulled the arrows out one by one and cast them as far as she could into the darkness. Brin was talking, but all she heard was a droning and the sound of her own thoughts: *Don't die. Don't die. Don't die*.

Havilar was so pale, nearly gray. The last arrow came free, and Brin clapped his hands over Havilar's belly, over the fountain of blood that welled up there, through his fingers.

"Loyal Fury," he said, his voice shaking, "aid this servant of your justice."

The air between hand and skin glowed with a sudden golden light. The hairs on Farideh's nape stood on end and the light intensified. Havilar screamed again, but something strange and sharp, like the ringing of a sword being sharpened overlaid the sound. Farideh squeezed her sister's hand hard as the light became

blinding and the ring of the sword and Havilar's scream twined into one sound … then faded.

Havilar lay still, her eyes shut.

"Havi!" Farideh cried, and she tapped her cheek. "Havi, no, Havi, wake up!"

Havilar twitched away from her sister's hand by the second tap and flinched. She groaned and her eyes fluttered open. "Am I dead yet?"

Farideh burst into tears and threw her arms around her sister's neck. "No, gods. No. You're fine. You're fine. Brin, oh gods, thank you! Thank you!"

Havilar reached up and hugged Farideh back. She was sorry. They were both sorry. Neither needed to say anything. It would be all right.

"Brin?" Havilar said, sounding dazed and weak. Farideh let her go.

"I'm here," he said, leaning closer.

"I didn't know you could do a priest's magic."

CHAPTER EIGHT

South of Neverwinter

12 Kythorn, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

Farideh stared at Brin's bloodied hands, Havilar's words bringing her back to her senses like a slap to the face.

I didn't know you could do a priest's magic.

It *had* been divine magic. There was no disguising it, no excusing it. The prayer to Torm. The flash of light. The sound of the sword on the whetstone.

Brin's face was pale, and he was holding his breath. His eyes watched Farideh's, flickering like candle flames as he tried to discern something—anything—in her gaze.

"You lied," she said.

"Yes," he admitted. Then, with a nervous smile, "Well, no. You didn't ask if I knew any divine magic."

"I didn't think I had to." All this time she'd been afraid of Tam finding out, and she'd revealed Lorcan to not only a priest, but a priest of Torm—in all the Heavens, there wasn't another god so opposed to the path she'd taken as the god of duty and law.

"I'm not …" he started to say. "I'm … certainly not the sort … to …" He sighed. "What is it? What are you afraid of?"

She blinked at Brin. It couldn't be true. "The caravan. You didn't use it on the caravan."

"Look, I know what it seems like. But I'm not—truly—I'm not a priest. I'm not even a paladin, and I … I had lessons, with holy champions. They taught me some things. But not everything."

"But this." She looked down at Havilar, at the wound that was only a scratch and the drying pools of her sister's blood. "They

taught you to heal."

Brin squirmed. "Sort of."

"Did you use it on the caravan?" She shook her head. Tam didn't know. He mustn't have done anything.

"It … doesn't always work," he said. "I told you before. I'm not cut out to be Tormish."

"But you didn't even try. "

"I would have been in the way. I would have—"

"You didn't even try," Farideh said. The shadow-smoke swirled around her as she surged to her feet. "You guess at my virtue, and look down on my choices, when you lie about *everything*, because …? Because you didn't want your tutors tracking you down? Is that it?"

"You kept your secrets!" Brin said, raising his voice. "And I kept mine."

"No one *died* because I kept my secrets," Farideh said.

"And you don't know anyone died for mine," Brin said. "Besides, if I'd told you I knew a little divine magic, you wouldn't even have spoken to me! You made that very clear in the woods."

"I said I never met a priest who gave me a reason to trust them," Farideh said, "and you're just proving me right."

"I'm not a priest!"

"Could you both just shut up?" Havilar said, still a little dazed. She pushed herself up. "I'm not dead. Who cares if he's a priest?"

"Mehen, to start with," Farideh said. "Lie down. You're not dead, but you're still hurt."

"Mehen's not going to care," Havilar said. "Probably. I mean, he let Tam come along. Tam's more of a priest than Brin."

"Lie down!" Farideh said. "Gods, please, lie down before you rip what's left of your wound open."

She did so, but added, "Is this what you meant when you said I was getting upset because I was scared? I think you're doing the same thing." Havilar lifted her head, her speech a little surer, her eyes a little more focused. "If this is a lesson, you're still a *henish* and I get it. You win."

Farideh nearly shrieked in annoyance, “No one’s *winning* anything here,” but she gritted her teeth instead and covered her face with her still-bloody hands. They were shaking and her breath was uneven. She wanted more than anything to throw up, as if doing so would rid her body of the fear and the shock, and the virulent magic that churned through her, boiling up, looking for an outlet—

With a great, infernal shout, she flung her hands toward the woods, away from Havilar and Brin, away from where the archer had flown. The air cracked and a great gout of roiling flames streamed from her into the night.

She turned on her sister and Brin, panting. They were both staring at her.

“Fine,” she said. “Havi, you’re right. I was frightened. Watching you nearly die, almost being killed myself, and then having to cut arrows out of my sister’s bleeding gut is exactly the same as you feeling left out. I’m sorry. And you,” she said to Brin, “I’m still angry at you. You can say a hundred times you’re not a priest, but when Torm just handed you a miracle, I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t have to,” Brin said. “But it’s true.”

Havilar chuckled, half to herself. “Do we have to call you ‘Brother Brin’ now?”

Brin wrinkled his nose. “If you do, I’ll never buy you whiskey again.”

Farideh frowned. None of this was making sense.

“You’re not a priest,” she said, “or a paladin, but Torm grants you magic? Even though you know good and well you stole that whiskey?”

“And I ran away from the orcs?” he added when she did not. Brin shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine, to be honest. I told you, I make a terrible holy champion, but sometimes … it works.”

Her heart was racing now. “Sometimes? You had me pull arrows from her gut for a *possibility?*”

“I had you pull the arrows because they were poisoning her,” Brin said. “If I couldn’t do it, I would have run for Tam.”

“And if the archer’s killed Tam?”

Farideh looked out into the woods. She'd said it only because it might have happened, because both of them were too reckless and she was already so used to pointing these things out to Havilar. But Tam and Mehen were still not back.

How far could the fire have thrown the archer? She turned back and realized Brin was watching the forest as well.

Gods, what idiots, she thought, snatching up the rod. Brin grabbed his short sword, and they stood over Havilar. The orc could have easily doubled back and followed the sounds of their arguing. He could have killed them, all three, while they shouted.

And it would be all her fault.

"Brin," she said, so quietly that even Mehen couldn't have faulted her. "I'm sorry. You're right. We all have secrets."

"I'm sorry too." He paused. "Have you told all of yours?"

"Yes," she said. "I swear." She swallowed. "Have you?"

The portal opened with a great gust of smoke and heat. The campfire swelled briefly as Lorcan stepped through. His gaze swept over the trio, but locked on Farideh. Whatever smugness, whatever gall had been in his expression fled and he ran to Farideh. He seized her by the arm and wiped at the streaks of Havilar's blood that now smeared her face.

"What happened? Are you hurt? Get off your feet."

"I'm fine," Farideh said. She looked down and realized there was blood all down the front of her, soaked into the leather. "Oh. It's Havi's," she said, but at those words she started shaking.

Lorcan let out a long sigh and gathered her up in his arms. "Heavens to Hells, I thought you were hurt."

For a breath, Farideh let him. She was tired, her nerves shattered, and she just wanted to hide from the world. *I won't let anyone catch you, darling*. For a breath, it felt like the safest place in Faerûn, and she was so glad someone had asked if she was all right. This close, he didn't smell like the portal. He smelled faintly musky, and like some exotic spice she didn't know—

No—she pulled away, nervously smoothed her bloodied jack. "Havilar … Havi's fine as well. Now." Lorcan's expression seemed to close, and he looked away.

“Of course she is,” he said, cool and unconcerned. “If she weren’t, you wouldn’t be nearly so calm, now would you, darling?” He crouched down on the ground beside Havilar. “Besides, you’re a tough one, aren’t you?”

Havilar’s mouth had fallen open. “Yes?” she ventured.

Lorcan looked over at Brin, his wicked smile turning into a sneer. “I see *you’re* doing perfectly well. Good to know you take your divine duty so seriously.”

“He saved Havilar,” Farideh said.

“He ought to have stopped the arrows in the first place,” Lorcan said.

“That’s enough,” Farideh said. “I told you to leave him be.”

“Or *you’d* leave, yes?” He looked her up and down. “And if you’d cast me aside, where would you be now? Cradling your sister’s dead body, I think. If you were a lucky little fool.”

Ignore him, she thought. You’re not a fool. But the shift from embracing her to calling her names was abrupt enough to remind her to be nervous. She held out the rod, her hand shaking only a little.

“What’s this do?”

Lorcan looked from her to it. “I told you,” he said, after a moment. “It helps you cast your spells better.”

“Much better, apparently,” she said. “I tried to make a fire bolt and I threw the orc who attacked us so far that Tam and Mehen haven’t come back from looking for him yet. What does it do?”

“It protects you,” he said smoothly, “when I’m not here to.”

“So if I use it against *anyone* it’s going to make a wave of fire that throws them a hundred yards away?” She pointed it at his chest. “What does it do?”

“I told you,” he said hotly. “It protects you. Improves your spells. Perhaps you need a little more practice with it.” He shoved the rod to the side, away from him. “Far be it from me to ask for a little thanks when that trinket is all that kept some mad orc from murdering your sister.”

Farideh narrowed her eyes. He wasn’t telling her everything, not by a long shot. But he was also furious, the throb of her scar told

her that.

Her scar … which hadn't so much as twinged before the portal opened. If Lorcan had been watching her, if he'd come because he'd seen the blood, it would mark the first time he'd appeared without irritating her brand first.

He'd known where she was already. He'd come for some other reason.

Some other reason he wasn't keen on sharing.

"Perhaps I shouldn't bother if you're going to be so ungrateful," he said.

She kept her gaze cold and lowered the rod. "Thank you."

"That's better," he said.

Mehen crashed back through the underbrush and into the campsite, his jaw wide, displaying the full array of his teeth for any threat to see. He tapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth and snapped it shut. "*Karshoj vir henish,*" he cursed. Then he froze and swung his head around to face Lorcan.

"What is he doing here?"

"I came to help," Lorcan said silkily.

"Havilar was hit," Farideh said. "He—"

In the chaos and the wall of Farideh's flames, Mehen hadn't realized Havilar had been hurt—Farideh could see it in the way his eyes widened, the way he suddenly ignored the fact that Lorcan was standing there, plain as the moon in the sky, and raced over to Havilar.

"You cut the arrows out?" he bellowed.

"They were—" Brin started, but Mehen cut him off.

"You cut the arrows out?" he said to Farideh. "What's the first *bloody thing* I taught you about arrow wounds?"

"They were poisoned," Farideh said. "She was dying." Her voice slid into a tremble. Lorcan set his hand on the middle of her back, and she could only imagine how it looked: her devil protecting her when she'd put her sister in danger.

"You should have packed it and waited for the priest! The apprentice could have managed that much, if you weren't capable. You could have killed her."

“She was already *dying!*” Farideh cried. “She couldn’t have waited.”

“Did *he* tell you that?” Mehen said. “Did he tell you to kill your sister?”

“Lorcan had nothing to do with it.”

“I’m all right now,” Havilar said. “Look.” She pulled up her shirt. Blood still smeared her skin, but the wound was only a shallow cut.

Mehen scrutinized the wound. “If it was minor enough to be cured with your healing potions, it was minor enough to not mess around with cutting into her gut.”

“But …” Havilar started to say. Farideh shook her head, and her twin stopped. For all Farideh was nervous about priests, Mehen had less use for them in principle than he did Lorcan. He didn’t trust Brin for being a boy and a priest’s apprentice—revealing Brin had also secretly been a priest of Torm while Mehen was this angry might mean Mehen would never trust Brin.

“But …” Havilar said. “Everything’s all right. Next time we won’t cut out the arrows.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Lorcan said, and the promise of violence in his voice sent a shiver up Farideh’s spine. He was still a monster.

Mehen snarled. “Farideh, put him away before Tam gets back, or I’ll let my sword do it for you.”

She heard Lorcan’s wings stiffen and spread. “I beg your pardon?” he said.

“You heard me, devil,” Mehen said. “Take your useless self off.”

Farideh turned and set her hands on Lorcan’s chest, pushing him back from the fire. “Lorcan, please. Go. You’ll just make it worse.”

Lorcan narrowed his eyes. He took hold of her wrists and shoved them away.

“I’m going to find that orc.” He glared at Mehen. “Perhaps then I’ll be useful enough.” A few ungainly flaps of his wings, and Lorcan was airborne and flying into the wood.

Farideh watched him go, not wanting to face Mehen or Havilar or Brin. Her pulse hadn’t slowed, her hands were still shaking. She didn’t think she had it in her to soothe Mehen on top of everything

else—especially if he was going to tear into her about Lorcan. Lorcan, who hadn't done anything wrong this time.

Except … he'd come as if from nowhere, without the slightest twinge to her scar. And the rod that made a wave of fire, a strengthening of the spell she knew into something entirely different, something Lorcan wasn't willing to explain.

"You're sure you're all right?" Mehen said to Havilar.

"Yes!" Havilar said. "I just need help bandaging what's left." Farideh finally turned back to see Havilar watching her. Worried.

"Where's Tam?" Brin asked.

"Still hunting that *pothac* orc." Mehen looked up at Farideh. "What am I supposed to tell him? Did you think about that before you went for a spell?" She looked away.

"Tell him she owns a rod enchanted with fire spells?" Brin said. He shrugged when all eyes turned to him. "It's not impossible. You can purchase such things in the large cities if you know where to look."

"That could work," Farideh said quietly.

"It shouldn't have to work," Mehen said. "I don't even want to know where you got that bloody thing. But we're selling it when we get to a large enough city."

No, Farideh thought, she wouldn't sell it. Not until she knew what its story was. Not until she was sure it was safe for someone else to hold.

And not until she found something better to replace it with.

She said none of this to Mehen, who stared at her as if he still didn't know what to do with her, as if he wished she were anyone else. As if—perhaps—he was afraid of her.

When Lorcan found that stupid orc, he was going to rend the bastard limb from shitting limb. Tear out his veins and strangle him with them. Pluck out his bones and beat him to death—

No, he thought, scanning the dark woods below. Not yet. As much as it seemed that Goruc had botched the plan, he had also deepened

the thing, entrenched it down into Farideh's mind, as certain as the sunrise. If the orc came again and his arrows found another heart, she wouldn't be suspicious or surprised. She would want revenge, he thought with a smile. She would do all manner of things to gain vengeance.

He thought of her standing there, covered in blood and pale with fear.

He would kill the orc afterward.

A light, small and cool, stood out bright and sharp among the bristling shadows of the firs and pines. Lorcan circled, dropping lower and landing behind a screen of sword ferns. He crouched low, peering into the darkness.

Not the orc, not at all, but a man, wiry and brown-skinned, carrying a chain that scintillated with a blessing that itched at Lorcan even across the distance.

The priest. The one Mehen didn't want to know about Lorcan.

Perfect, Lorcan thought. He didn't need a silverstar keeping Farideh company either. He took hold of the charm that granted him invisibility, and crept through the darkness toward the cool light of the priest's magic. He matched his footfalls to the priest's own, any sound masked by the silverstar's steps.

Lorcan drew his sword. Faster than a spell and inarguably more satisfying. If they found the silverstar, the orc's dagger would match enough to explain it away. A pity he couldn't kill that little pretender paladin, who didn't even try to protect Farideh.

The priest turned and looked directly at where Lorcan stood. Perhaps he'd heard something, but it didn't matter. The charm was impenetrable. He could stare all he liked—

The chain lashed out, nipping at Lorcan's elbow. He cried out and let go of the charm as he yanked his arm away, rendering him completely visible. The priest raised his eyebrows.

Forget the blade—Lorcan gathered up his own spell, something to make the priest burn from the inside out with the fevers and corruptions of Malbolge.

The priest reached calmly into his collar and pulled out an amulet. "*Vennela.*"

Lorcan's spell fizzled into nothing. He clutched at another spell, a simpler thing, but it too collapsed. Cold horror seized him.

He reached for the sword again, but this time it was only to defend himself. The bastard priest had *bound* him, and nothing Lorcan set against him would work until the binding was undone. Even a quick lunge of the sword would probably knock Lorcan flat and screaming. Very slowly he set his thumb on the green ring, preparing to turn it, if that chain so much as twitched.

The priest looked him over once. "I'm not in the mood to hunt you right now," the silverstar said. "It would just make both of us annoyed and I have other quarry. But make no mistake, devil, if you don't flee now, you'll be next."

"And I suppose you're not in the mood for my assistance either?" Lorcan said. "I only saw your light and thought you might be interested in … directions."

The priest held up the amulet. It felt as if crystals of ice were growing in Lorcan's veins, spearing the flesh and splintering the bone. He flinched.

"Trust me," the priest said. "If I have to send you back myself, you won't enjoy it."

I could kill him, Lorcan thought. I could. What good is the blood of an erinyes if you don't give into the bloodthirst now and again? To the Hells with the amulet—if he just dived at—

No, Lorcan thought. He stepped back. Whatever blood he carried, he was cleverer than an erinyes. Whatever bloodlust he bore, it did not approach his sisters' suicidal mania. And the key difference: If he were an erinyes, or a full-blooded devil as this priest seemed to believe, death would only return Lorcan to Malbolge, shamed and delayed, but whole nonetheless. But if the priest killed the cambion, Lorcan would be as dead as any mortal, unless Asmodeus pulled him back from the brink of the Fugue Plane. A scenario Lorcan did not wish to test.

"Another time then," he said, and he was in the air before the priest could have the last word. Another time indeed—the silverstar would make a fit target. Right after Brin and that overcompensating plague-orphan, Mehen.

But first: Goruc.

The orc had been clever as well. Without his night-piercing sight, Lorcan wouldn't have noticed the trail of broken grass that marked the passage of a dragging body across a clearing and up into the brush. Goruc lay still beneath a gorse bush, his hides blackened once more and his right arm bent inward.

"You," the orc said, when Lorcan pushed the brush aside. He sat up, seizing his axe in his off hand.

"Me," Lorcan agreed. "How much of that wyssin did you take? Or are you so stupid you can't tell the difference between a human boy and a tiefling girl?"

Goruc bared his yellowed teeth in a cruel grin. "You can have her in the Hells then."

"I think not," Lorcan said. "What's more, I have suspicions, Goruc, that you were not aiming to hit the glaivemistress, but her sister."

"Your witch burned me again," the orc said. "Knocked my shoulder loose when she threw me."

"I gave you one order," Lorcan said coldly. "One stricture that you were not to disobey. And yet you did."

Goruc sneered. "What does it matter? I'm damned either way."

"Oh, it matters," Lorcan said. "It matters a very great deal." He seized the orc by the shirt front, and used his thumb to spin the green ring that linked him to the Needle of the Crossroads.

Goruc had clearly never experienced interplanar travel. Lorcan slung the orc into the antechamber, and Goruc promptly vomited all over the floor. Lorcan closed the portal and seized Goruc by the back of his collar. Disoriented and frightened, Goruc could do little more than scrabble along with Lorcan through the haunted palace of Osseia, making pathetic whimpering noises.

Lorcan dragged him out onto the nearest balcony, thrusting Goruc's torso over the edge. Below, the landscape of Malbolge, the warped and perverted corpse of the Hag Countess—Glasya's unfortunate predecessor—stretched, horror after horror, away from the hag's former skull and off into the distance.

“There,” Lorcan said, pointing to a mound in the midst of the oozing plains. “That is where you’ll begin—if you behave. They’ll harvest your soul and what’s left will get to enjoy the delightful experience of rising up the hierarchy of the Hells. In perhaps a thousand years, you’ll creep your way up to being a member of the legions and promptly be crushed by an angry war devil. And you will feel *lucky* for it.

“If you think what you’ve seen thus far is bad, remember Goruc: this is our home. This is what is normal. Now”—he seized the orc’s face and wrenched his head toward the east, where the finger bone towers rose up, where the first of the towers loomed—“that tower? Is full of horrors you can’t imagine. They torture the worst of the worst there. In there, that’s where they torture devils. Ever hear a nightmare scream for mercy?” Still gripping Goruc by the face, he leaned down to speak in the orc’s ear. “You *touch* my warlock and you will never forget the sound. I’ll make certain. Not even while you’re being dissolved alive in a lake of acid. I’ll pull you out before you’re gone though. There are so many ways to spend eternity in Malbolge.

“That,” he said, shoving the orc away and to the floor, “is how it matters. You’re right—you’re damned either way—but I decide how *exactly* your damnation proceeds.”

Goruc scrambled to his feet, trembling to his every extremity, gabbling in whatever tongue it was that orcs spoke. That, Lorcan thought, is much more appropriate. Damn Mehen. Damn the priest. Damn Farideh too if she was going to shove him away and listen to them.

“I’ll kill the boy,” Goruc said, finding his voice. “Just as you order.”

“No,” Lorcan said. “You want to be in my good graces again, Goruc? I want the boy. I want the silverstar. And I want the dragonborn. All dead beyond any cleric’s skill to return them. The tieflings you don’t *touch.* Understand?”

“That’s …” Goruc shook his head. “How? The boy is one thing and maybe the dragonborn … but him *and* the silverstar … They’ll have my head before I get close enough to take theirs.”

Lorcan sneered. “You’ll find a way. Or I’ll find you.”

Goruc shook his head. “You said they’re heading for the cities. I need more time. I can track them in the wilds but the streets of Luskan? I’ll be hunting them my whole life.”

Tendays, Lorcan thought. He had tendays at best, now that she was asking questions about the Rod of the Traitor’s Reprisal, now that the boy was set against him, now that the silverstar had seen him. He unclenched his fists—Invadiah wouldn’t appreciate him asking for another of her treasures. He’d have to snatch it quickly, and not go after anything more.

“Give me your axe,” he said to Goruc. “I’ve something better to replace it with.”



Sairché watched Lorcan and the orc with the dislocated shoulder reenter the anteroom that held the Needle of the Crossroads, among other treasures of her mother’s, all but forgotten and sticky with the secretions of Osseia. She’d wiped down the trunk she perched upon, before settling herself behind a spell of invisibility.

Lorcan pulled down a case from one of the tidy piles and opened it. Inside lay an axe of shining mithral, with black runes inlaid down its haft. “Take it,” he said. “It will hunt the blood of your enemies.”

The orc lifted the axe with his good arm and tested its weight, his eyes shining and awed as though he held a relic. It was a relic, of sorts, Sairché thought. No one laid curses quite as strong as the one on that axe anymore.

“Now,” Lorcan said, snapping the case shut. He waved his hand to activate the portal of the Needle and seized the orc by his wounded arm. “Get going.”

Both flashed out of existence for a moment, but Sairché knew when to be patient. Secrets didn’t uncover themselves, even if Lorcan was being exceedingly sloppy with this one—especially for him. While she could count on one hand the number of her half-sisters who could aspire, perhaps, one day, to Invadiah’s levels of intrigue—if they didn’t get demoted by crashing in where they

didn't belong, or killed in some skirmish with another Layer—Sairché and Lorcan were different. Cunning Invadiah had no other cambion children.

Sairché wondered sometimes if their sire had been as cunning—or perhaps, craftier still; Invadiah still had the savagery her sisters became known for after the Ascension. But his identity was one secret Sairché had never managed to flush out. Invadiah had taken what she needed—twice—and never dealt with him again, as far as anyone knew. Certainly not to gain more offspring—Lorcan was the last of Invadiah's efforts to expand her ranks. If she wasn't going to get erinyes, she wasn't going to bother.

And she certainly wasn't going to see to the cambions' inheritance.

The portal flashed again, and Lorcan stepped through.

"Does your orc know that axe's cursed?" Sairché asked. With her words, the invisibility ceased.

To his credit, Lorcan didn't look up at her. "Does it matter?" he said. "It will lead him where he needs to go and keep him from stopping along the way."

"And when he can't set it down?"

"Once he kills the people he's hunting, he'll be able to set it down."

Sairché shook her head. "That's the orc who wants to kill your, ahem, paramour isn't it?" Now, that startled him. She fluttered her silvery lashes. "He won't put it down until she's dead, will he?"

"He doesn't even know her," he said, shaking his head. "But you're right; he wants someone else dead, someone I'd rather he didn't kill." He finally turned to face her. "Who have you been talking to?"

Sairché shrugged. She didn't need to talk to a soul as long as Lorcan blustered and shouted from the battlements about the orc staying away from his warlock. Connecting the orc to the fresh-faced little tiefling she'd caught him with had been a gamble.

One she wasn't certain she'd won at yet—Lorcan might be a fool in some ways, but in others, Sairché had to give him his due. She

was never completely certain if Lorcan was lying or not. With all those warlocks, he might be telling the truth, after all.

"Why?" she said, approaching from another tack. "Do you have confederates in stealing mother's things?"

"Well, you, now that you've watched me and not bothered to do anything about it." Pulling the door open, he added, "We both know she'll be just as unhappy about *that*."

"Hmph," Sairché said. "Well-played." But the game wasn't finished.

Lorcan paused in the doorway, and for a moment, Sairché tensed, afraid he'd come after her with a spell or his sword—Sairché knew magic aplenty but her spells were better for ferreting out secrets than blasting attackers.

"Do you know," Lorcan said, "how old you are?"

"Older than you. Younger than the Ascension. Why?"

He shook his head. "Curiosity," he said, with a grin so wicked, she wondered if she ought to be worried about what he could do with such a detail.

CHAPTER NINE

NEVERWINTER

12 KYTHORN, THE YEAR OF THE DARK CIRCLE (1478 DR)

FARIDEH KEPT HER EYES ON THE HORIZON OF THE ROAD AS IT WOUND down through the high hills, in and out of Neverwinter Wood. Eventually, the city would be there. Eventually, she would have to tell Mehen she wasn't going on with them to Luskan. She was staying in Neverwinter. Her stomach knotted. She hadn't said a word to Mehen since the night before, and after another night of fitful, interrupted sleep, Farideh didn't trust herself to make it through a conversation as fraught as the one she intended, and she ran through it for perhaps the thousandth time in her imagination.

First she would say, "I'm staying in Neverwinter."

"No," Mehen would say, "you're not."

"I am, I need better training. I will stay here and find a warlock who knows what I can do. Who knows how I can do … Who knows how to do what we do better."

She chewed her lip. She needed to be more convincing than that.

"You want me to control Lorcan better. How am I to do that without training?"

Mehen would say, "I don't want you to control Lorcan. I want you to get rid of him."

As if it were that simple. As if she only had to say "Begone!" and he'd vanish forever. As if she would be happy once she had no pact, no devil, no Lorcan—as if the sword would suddenly be enough.

No, she thought, as if having Mehen and Havilar as my protectors would suddenly be enough. *Stay here. Keep out of the way. You'll just cause trouble.*

Surely Mehen did not want her to continue clinging to his elbow like a little girl—no weapon, no profession, no future? He would never say such a thing, but everything he did say to her seemed to draw a heavy line under the idea: Nothing was as good as being the foster daughter of Clanless Mehen. To look outward was to imply the life Mehen wished for them was not enough.

But it wasn't enough, she realized now. For so many years, it had been fine—better than fine—but now … now it was as if she'd outgrown her leash and choked on the collar. She couldn't bear, she realized, to be nothing but the daughter of Clanless Mehen.

Havi … Thinking of leaving Havilar was even harder.

Sometimes it felt as if the world looked at them and saw one person. And all that person's attributes had to be divided between the twins. If Havilar was the reckless one, Farideh must be the responsible one. If she was the cheerful one, then Farideh was the gloomy one. If Farideh was the clever one, Havilar was the foolish one. How much, Farideh sometimes wondered, are we who we are because of that divide? Was she gloomy, because people had said all along Havilar was cheerful? Did Havi act foolish sometimes because people called Farideh clever? Did Farideh worry because there could only be one reckless one?

But I *am* reckless, she thought. I took the pact. I won't leave Lorcan. I'm planning to abandon my family before they can abandon me.

She had always known Havilar was Mehen's favorite—a little detail that rubbed against her heart like a grain of sand, until she hardened against it. It just was. But last night … last night, he had been afraid—they all had been afraid—and he had blamed Farideh for everything.

In fact, she thought, the only person who had asked her if she was all right at any point in that terror of a night, was Lorcan.

She rubbed her arm where her scar lay, dull and ordinary as it had been for the rest of the night and the entirety of the morning, and wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time that morning, whether Lorcan was all right.

Lorcan *was* lying about the rod. Farideh had gone off into the woods before they left and tested it. Nothing but her usual spells. Nothing extraordinary. It didn't make the wave of fire happen on its own. The fact that Lorcan had lied to her—or at least talked her in a circle again—had her grinding her teeth.

But at the same time she was so grateful he had wrapped his arms around her and given thanks she wasn't dead. Even though the archer had shot Havilar, Farideh looked into his eyes and saw—without a doubt—that the orc wanted her dead. When she tried to sleep, all she could see were those dark, vicious eyes watching her as if she were prey, and Havilar's wound becoming her own.

If she said this, Mehen would be angry she wasn't worrying about Havilar.

If she pointed out only Lorcan checked to see if she was all right, he would think Lorcan was corrupting her.

But if she was walking all the way to Neverwinter, worrying about the fact that her scar hasn't so much as twinged … had he been corrupting her?

She squeezed her eyes closed and opened them wide a few times. Maybe someone would call for a halt. Not her, not after last night. She'd rather pass out on her feet then ask Mehen to stop.

Havilar dropped back to walk beside her, and for a few dozen feet, she didn't say anything. She tucked her arm around Farideh's.

"You're swaying a little. And you've got shadows under your eyes, worse than ever." Havilar kept step with her, watching her face. "Do you want me to tell Mehen I'm going to throw up?" she whispered. "So we can stop? I might throw up from the poison, right?"

"No," Farideh said. "It's fine."

Havilar squeezed her arm. "I never said thank you," she said quietly.

"You would have done the same." Farideh cracked a smile. "Probably quicker, too, and with less … excess."

"No," Havilar said. "Well, yes, that. Thank you for getting rid of him. But I meant the arrows." She clutched Farideh's arm a little more tightly. "Gods, you can't imagine how they hurt … Mehen

might have been upset, but I'm glad you did cut them out. Especially since it probably wasn't easy." She swallowed. "Actually I *might* throw up if we talk about it."

"Let's not then," Farideh said, and she squeezed Havilar's arm back. They walked a little farther on, before Havilar pulled her to a stop.

"I told," Havilar whispered. "I told Mehen about Brin. And the spell he did. The prayer. It wasn't fair," she said when Farideh tried to interrupt, "that he was blaming you for the arrows."

"What did he say?"

She hesitated. "I was trying to help."

"Havi? What did he say?"

Havilar bit her lip. "He's angry we lied. And he's still angry about Lorcan. I thought you said Lorcan wouldn't come through if there were people around?"

Farideh shook her head. "He does what he wants, I suppose. I'll work on it."

"Mehen thinks you ought to—"

"I know what Mehen thinks."

Havilar let go of her arm. "Well I think it too. Where does this end? You aren't even trying to get rid of him anymore."

"No one told you to get rid of Kidney Whatsit, there, just because you kept hitting people on the head when you started. I just need a chance to practice."

"There's a *very* big difference between a devil and a blunted glaive. And it's Eater—"

"Oh, go argue with Brin!"

Farideh hurried to catch up to the rest of the group, where Havilar would be less willing to give her trouble. After last night, it was all too clear what Havilar's problem was: she was jealous. Jealous of all the wrong things, Farideh thought. Havilar didn't care that Farideh could cast a wall of flames or make lava erupt out of the ground. Havilar cared that somebody was paying attention to Farideh and not to her.

Havilar was jealous that Farideh was doing something without her.

She lifted her head and saw Tam watching her. She dropped her eyes and scowled at the ground. As far as she knew, the silverstar hadn't worked out that she was a warlock, but the way he looked at everything it seemed far more likely he knew and just hadn't decided to say anything. Yet.

"There it is!" Brin called.

From the crest of the road, Farideh could see the shattered remains of old Neverwinter, the bones of the new city growing over them. In places, the reborn city looked as if nothing had ever happened to it. In others, the damages of the fall of Neverwinter were fresh as if it had happened mere tendays ago. Rivers of hardened lava poured down the mountain's slopes. The wide wall that stretched away as far as she could see was broken through in places. And slashed across the western end of the city—

"*Karshoj,*" Havilar breathed. She clambered up on a rock. "What in the Hells is *that?*"

Beyond another high wall, dotted with soldiers on patrol, a rift split the southwest quarter city in twain. It was as if some god had taken an enormous blade and sliced through the surface of the city, peeling open the world and leaving behind a deep wound that festered with blue fire. The hairs all along Farideh's spine stood up.

"Spellplague," Brin said.

"Spellplague?" Havilar repeated, excitedly. "Hells and broken planes—do you think there are *spellscarred* here? It would be so exciting to have a—"

"*Thrik*!" Mehen barked. "Don't you even tease about that. If you so much as go *near* that rift—"

"All *right,*" Havilar said. "I was only saying."

Farideh watched the dancing blue light that illuminated the deep rift and played up the crumbling walls. How many people thought the same as Havilar joked?—that there was power to seize there, that it might be harnessable. That they might be able to tame something as unpredictable as spellplague. As many as think the same of devils? she thought bitterly.

"What if the quarry went near it?" Havilar said. "Or *into* it?"

“Then we let her go, because none of us are going near that,” Mehen said. “And stop trying to make up reasons to.”

The size of the remaining walls beggared belief. Like mountains, they distorted the distance between the rise where they’d first spied the city and the gates themselves, and it was only as Farideh registered the people ahead of her on the road that she appreciated the massiveness of the city wall of Neverwinter.

The road leading to the gates of the city was crowded with carts and horses and bodies. Farideh pulled her cloak closer and concentrated on keeping the shadows from swallowing her up.

The guards at the gate kept a close eye on them as they passed, but between Tam’s shabby stateliness, Brin’s well-cut clothes, and Mehen’s stiff back, the guards seemed to approve of their little group well enough, and pointed them in the direction of the northern districts.

Now, Farideh thought. Now is when you do it. She looked at Havilar, and thought about their argument, the last one they might ever have.

They don’t have to leave you, Farideh thought. They just have to let you stay. It didn’t soothe her any. Mehen and Havilar would never agree to her plans. Especially as ill-formed as they were. Where did one find warlocks?

“This is where we part,” Tam said. He took out his coinpurse and handed over two gold pieces to Mehen. “It’s been a pleasure. I’m sorry we never tracked down that archer.”

Mehen grunted. “May your roads be clear and your travels easy.”

Tam smiled, but it was an uneasy smile, as if he were trying to decide what to say. “I’ll be in the city for a few days, at least. Should you … need anything, I’ll be in the Temple of Selûne in the northern district. The … new one.” He looked to Brin, as if he were making certain the boy had heard him well enough. Brin squirmed, but nodded.

He said his farewells to the twins. “Take care of that blade,” he said to Havilar.

To Farideh, he said quietly, after an awkward moment, “It will be all right. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” Before she could

think of a reply, he nodded once more to Mehen and was off.

Now, she thought.

"I'm—"

"Does that mean his 'apprentice' isn't accompanying him?" Mehen interrupted acidly. "How surprising."

"So you figured me out." Brin took a deep breath, seeming to screw up his courage. "I have a proposal."

"Do you now?"

"Your bounty? That dark-haired woman? You *did* get ahead of her."

A thrill of triumph went through Farideh—she had been *right*—before she realized Brin shouldn't know anything about the bounty.

"Oh?" Mehen folded his great arms over his chest. "So I have two budding experts?"

"She isn't north of here," Brin said, "and it's a waste of your time to go any farther. I know … I know because she's my cousin. Constancia Crownsilver. She's … she's chasing after me."

Whatever Mehen had expected Brin to say, that was not it. His ridges all stood a little straighter and sharper, and he tapped the roof of his mouth.

"You're not lying now?" he said, roughly. "You're not wasting my time?"

"No," Brin said. "And that's the heart of my proposal. She wants to find me and bring me back to Cormyr. She's clever and she's dangerous, and I know she's going to find me eventually. If I stay with you three … well, then when she finds me you can capture her. That should slow her down a little bit." He wet his lips. "But in return, you need to *promise* me that you'll be gentle with her. Whatever she's guilty of, she isn't a danger to anyone but me. Just make sure she knows you're taking her to the Temple of Torm and I promise she'll go easily." Mehen snorted. "What do you have to lose? You haven't caught her yet, and you're only running out of road."

"If we stayed," Farideh said, "and waited here, there are plenty of ways to make a little coin, I'll bet." Many of the people passing them were hauling building materials deeper into the city—carts of

lumber and stone, workers with tools slung over their shoulders, sledges of bricks. “And we need supplies.”

Brin nodded. “So? Do we have a deal?”

Mehen gave a great rusty sigh. “One condition: you make yourself known. There’s no sense to us squatting in this city while this woman races right past us. Once we know where we’re staying, I want the guards and your priest friend and the priests you *do* assist, boy, to know exactly where that is. If she’ll come to us, I want the path easy and clear.”

“All right,” Brin said, and he held out a hand to shake. Mehen ignored him.

“Supplies first,” he said. “And we’ll see if anyone can point us to work.”

They wended their way up the crowded main road, following in Mehen’s wake. The buildings that lined the way shone with fresh paint and fresher lumber. The roof slates hadn’t even gotten mossy yet on most of them. And while the road itself was cobbled in places with ancient bricks and in others with worn-down lava flows, it was level and clean.

It was only when they’d gone a hundred steps or so that Farideh realized Havilar didn’t have her hood up … and no one was staring.

It nearly stopped her in her tracks. People were *noticing* certainly, but their eyes passed over the twins without much fear or menace. It was as if they’d grown bored of tieflings. One’s a person, she thought, two’s some people … Tentatively, she pulled her own hood off. The more she looked around her the more faces she noticed herself. And more and more of them were tieflings as well. Those old men with their scraggly horns, that woman with her bright red skin, those girls with their tails poking out through their skirts. She made eye contact with a tiefling man with a longbow slung over one arm and got a saucy wink in return.

Havilar dropped back to walk beside her. “This place is *lousy* with tieflings,” she said. “Gods, why are you blushing *now?*”

“No one’s looking at us either,” she said, ignoring Havilar’s question.

“Oh, people are looking,” Havilar said. “At least, some of these fellows are looking at me.”

“I *mean* they’re not surprised,” Farideh said, blushing even harder.

“Do you think they’re all right?” Havilar said. “I mean, the way people go on … Maybe this is where all the evil tieflings come from.”

Farideh sighed. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s not some city that creates evil tieflings like some sort of export. They’re probably as good or as bad as anyone else.”

“Anyone else with devil’s blood,” Havilar said, looking askance at an old woman in bloodred robes sitting in the shadow of a half-finished building.

Mehen stopped in front of a ramshackle shop with everything from waterskins to whetstones displayed in the small, dusty windows—Claven’s General Supplies and Armory—and barked at them to catch up and put their hoods back on. Farideh did as she was bade, even though not even she was nervous about walking through Neverwinter uncovered.

A bell tinkled over the door as they entered. The shop was tidier than its exterior suggested, though just as varied. Shelves of tinctures and salves lined the walls. A spool of rope that came to Farideh’s hip stood in one corner, waiting to be measured out in more usable lengths. A cobbler’s bench stood in the opposite corner, and a tailor’s form beside it, plus a row of dummies bedecked in armor pieces. A curtain hung over a doorway behind the counter’s table, and a slim, bald man wearing worn, but well-mended robes came through it, a broad smile on his face.

“Well met, friends,” the man said, “and welcome. Is there anything I can help you find? Anything you might need assistance with?”

Mehen stopped tapping his tongue. “We need some information and some supplies.”

The man smiled and set a pair of spectacles on the bridge of his nose. “Let me know how I can be of service.” He seemed to notice Havilar and Farideh, tucked behind Mehen then. “Well, good

morning there. Well met! Are you traveling with this fine soldier, my dears? Or is he traveling with you?" He chortled to himself. "Come, come, you needn't hide yourselves."

"Leave them be," Mehen growled.

But Havilar had already pulled the edge of her hood back, uncovering enough of her face to see the ridge of horn on her brow and the solid color of her golden eyes.

"There, there," the man said, "I meant no disrespect. I don't know where you've traveled from, but there are few here who would ask a lovely girl like that to wrap herself head to toe on such a summer's day. There, my dear," he added and Havilar pulled the hood away, freeing her sweat-stiff hair. "Much better, isn't it?"

"Much," she agreed, and she wandered over to admire the armor, trailed by Brin.

Farideh cautiously followed suit, the man nodding encouragement. But when she pulled free of the hood his gaze seemed to catch on her, and his smile wavered.

She nearly cursed. It was the eyes, of course—she should have been ready for that. Her cheeks burned and she turned her attention —and her eyes—to the shelves of wares displayed along the wall.

Mehen rattled off a list of things they needed—oil for lanterns and for weapons and for cooking, thread and needles, cloth for bandages, and such. "And what's your price on healing potions? We're short two."

"Fifty and twelve," the shopkeeper said, busying himself behind the counter. "I'm afraid you'll find we're a bit more expensive up here in the hinterlands."

Mehen shook his head. "Leave the potions off. We're also interested in a possible bounty for a squad of orcs in the forest. Who should we ask about that?"

The man took a moment to reply. "That … would probably be the Lord Protector's business," he said. "Or perhaps the House of Knowledge? The Oghmanytes won't have much for you, but they've taken over the care of those affected by the Chasm and the rigors of the journey here."

Mehen snorted. "Which is closer?"

“Oh, the temple is at the far end of the Wall. And the Lord Protector is ensconced at the Hall of Justice west there.” He chuckled to himself. “Head north—you won’t be able to miss either. Do you need somewhere to stay? My, ahem, friends have many spare rooms. Some with good fireplace?” Farideh glanced back at the man and Mehen. The shopkeeper had a look of anticipation, as if he were expecting Mehen’s reply to be significant.

“No,” Mehen said, completely missing the man’s meaning, whatever it was.

“Mehen!” Havilar cried. “*Look* at this armor!” The armor in question was little more than strategic chainmail patches and leather straps. Even the dummy looked cold. “I would look *fantastic* in this armor.”

“My armormaker calls that the Cunning Fox design,” the shopkeeper said. “Very easy to move in. I could have it ready in a tenday or two. It would be lovely on you.”

“It would be useless.” Mehen grunted. “Bah! One swift chop here”—a thunk as he hit the dummy—“and you’ve had your lung collapsed. This is armor for people playing adventurer.”

Farideh turned back to the bottles. Reds and blues and greens. She picked up a dark blue one, tilted it to catch the light. *Potion of Vitality*, the handwritten label read, *for poisons, illness, and most grievous wounds*. She set it back down very carefully. It was probably worth more coin than she’d ever seen in one place.

A good thing too. The shopkeeper was suddenly beside her, pulling down pots of oil. He looked over at her and frowned again. She blushed and kept her eyes on the bottles.

“Would I be mistaken,” he murmured after a moment, “if I asked if you bore a mark?”

Farideh caught her breath. She glanced over at him, trying to gauge how dangerous the situation, how disturbed he was by her appearance, before she tried to explain it was only an eye—

But the shopkeeper was smiling now. When she didn’t reply, he made a vague gesture at the side of his chest, then glanced over at the others.

A warlock’s brand, she thought.

“You’re … you too?” she whispered. “How … how did you know?”

He pulled another pot of oil down. “A gift. When you’re bound, it leaves a particular signature.” He eyed her again, in a way that made Farideh feel as if he were appraising the set of her viscera. She fought not to shudder. “You’re new to this, though. Yours is very faint. And you’re a warlock.”

“Yes,” she said. “Wait … you aren’t? I thought that was the only way to …”

He chuckled. “No, but I know plenty. I could introduce you.”

“That … I would appreciate that greatly.” She smiled. “I came to Neverwinter because I heard … That is, there are supposed to be many of you here. I hardly know what I’m doing.”

“You’re alive and you’re hale,” he said with a chuckle. “You’re doing better than most. When your friends have found where they are staying, come back and visit,” he added. “We’ll talk more then.” He hurried back to the counter and began wrapping Mehen’s purchases into several neat bundles.

Havilar was still arguing with Mehen. “But if I’m *faster*, then—”

“Then you’ll have your organs speared on the move. You have perfectly good armor,” Mehen said, handing over a stack of coins and taking the bundles. “Let’s go.”

Farideh glanced back once as she headed out the door. The shopkeeper smiled again and waved. Though she didn’t mean to, she thought of Lorcan’s wicked smile—of how angry he’d be if he knew she were looking for ways to control him.

That’s exactly why you need to do this, she thought, waving back at the shopkeeper. It was unaccountably lucky she’d found what she was looking for so quickly—Lorcan would hardly have time to convince her not to speak to the shopkeeper anyway.

Rohini was walking back from the market when she spotted the dragonborn—a big surly fellow with an overlarge sword and a distracted expression.

Perfect, she thought, watching him draw closer. Better than anyone she'd seen all morning—the city might have had plenty of big, muscley sorts, but Rohini wanted clever ones too. Skilled ones. The sword on his back was a fine, unusual weapon and suggested he was no mere brute.

She slipped through the crowd, keeping pace. Being a dragonborn made it all the better. Durable with all those scales, she thought. Built like a pit fiend. He could likely snap one of the Sovereignty's regular servitors in half—and that was before she got to spellscarring him.

She'd need more, but the best way to find more dragonborn was still to take this one. And if that didn't work, well, he could go dig sickly orcs out of the ruined quarter instead of Rohini.

A human boy with streaky, dark hair was trailing after him, carrying a bundle of packages. When the crowd thinned, she sprinted toward him and crashed directly into the boy with the packages. Her basket of supplies dumped over, scattering candles and rolls of muslin and tinctures in metal flasks. The boy crashed to the ground with the packages. The dull *clink* of something within breaking, and a deep golden liquid began to seep through the cloth.

Perfect, Rohini thought.

"Oh!" Rohini pulled the boy to his feet. "Oh, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I just … Gods, they went everywhere." He bent down and started picking up candles. She looked up to see the dragonborn storming back toward her. "I must beg your forgiveness, goodsir. I was in such a hurry …" The dragonborn kneeled and began picking up the packages, cursing under his breath. "You must let me repay you."

"Mehen!" The dragonborn's eyes looked past Rohini and into the crowd. Two tieflings came rushing up, and it took Rohini a moment to recognize that they belonged with the dragonborn; there were so many tieflings in the city. It took a moment more for her to realize they were twins. Curious. And not a complication Rohini wanted.

"You'll never believe what they're selling—" one of them started. She looked at the packages on the ground. "What happened?"

“Just a little spill,” Rohini said, focusing again on Mehen. “If you’ll come with me to the House of Knowledge, I can give you coin for what I’ve ruined.”

“House of Knowledge?” the dragonborn said. “Heard you might be willing to pay out bounties on orcs in the wood.”

“Well,” she said, putting magic in her voice to lure him in. “I can’t provide you with any sort of bounty. But I can always use help. There are patients to—”

“Never mind,” Mehen said, and turned as if to count his charges. Rohini wrinkled her nose. He was going to be difficult. She reached out and touched his arm.

“Oh, let me finish,” she said. “There are patients who need tending, but also plenty of chores. And there’s a wall on the southern side which has collapsed. I could certainly use someone strong to help us rebuild it.” Mehen turned back to her and she smiled. “You would have room and board in the House of Knowledge, of course. And I’m sure we could find the stores to give you a little coin to make your time better spent.”

Mehen shook his head once, as if shooing a fly. He peered at her a moment. “That … sounds like a good idea,” he said. “Safe. Simple. What was your name?”

“Rohini,” she said.

“I’m Mehen,” he said. “And these are my daughters, Farideh and Havilar. And that is Brin.”

Rohini kept her expression polite and blank, but in her thoughts this new piece of information was being turned and twisted and tried to fit into place. Tieflings always passed their curse down, but not through a dragonborn—nothing crossed with a dragonborn. Not even elves, who seemed to bed everything in sight despite their high and mighty protests. How had these two convinced him he was their father? And who was Brin?

Kill them now, the demon in her urged.

No, the devil whispered. They may be useful.

“I’m sure you have quite a tale there,” she said.

Mehen nodded, but as he nodded, it seemed his whole body rocked back and forth. The domination was secure.

The tieflings gave each other a puzzled look—the sort of look that was full of meaning if you knew what to look for. The one with the sword on her belt stepped forward and set a hand on the dragonborn's shoulder.

"*Mehen wux bensvenk?*" the girl said. Draconic, Rohini thought, or something close anyway. Mehen looked at her and blinked. The domination shivered off of him. Rohini tensed.

"Of course I'm well," he said. He looked back to Rohini. "We're … We'd be happy to help for a little while. Not our usual undertaking, but if there's a little coin and some meals to it, we'd be pleased. Where should we head?"

Rohini's pleasant smile returned. "You can follow me. The House of Knowledge is to the north, near the Chasm, merely a song away."

"But," the one with the glaive said, "Mehen, you said we weren't to go anywhere near the rift."

"This is different," he said, and if he didn't believe it, he would soon enough.

Rohini led them up to the House of Knowledge, the ancient temple spreading along and into the wall. The tieflings gawked and stared as if they'd never seen a building before, as they passed through the entry and into the open hall. The sun shone down through the many windows. Through the broken panes, the sounds of the city wafted in. The strong scent of medicinal herbs and dusty books pervaded the place, as well as the electric sensation of the faded blessings only Rohini felt.

"Here we are," Rohini said, gesturing at the chamber off the main corridor where the supplies were stored. "You'll need to wear robes to mark you as part of the hospital. There are plenty of spare ones in the cabinets over yonder. Why don't you three go find some that fit and then we'll see about rooms?"

The three glanced up at the dragonborn before following Rohini's suggestion. Good, she thought, or bad. Depending on Mehen.

"You," Rohini said, slipping in front of Mehen as he tried to follow, "should stay with me though."

He watched his three charges as they walked away. "What for?"

“I have some questions.” The power of Rohini’s charm trailed along her exhalation, coiling around Mehen like a serpent. His eyes snapped to her, grew distant, then glassy. “And,” Rohini added, “you dearly want to answer them, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the dragonborn said. “Anything.”

“Tell me,” Rohini said, “are you a warrior of Tymanther? Or some other company?”

“Was,” the dragonborn said. “Clanless now. Just a wanderer.”

“A pity.” So no easily found and captured dragonborn tromping alongside him. Ah well, she’d think of something. “And what did you do to deserve such a fate?” She ran a finger along the dragonborn’s jaw frill. “Take up with Tiamat?”

“Love,” the dragonborn said, “when clan came first.”

“Charming,” Rohini said. Easy to toy with and better than worrying about crossing the Dragon Queen. He was almost a perfect specimen. “Tell me about the tieflings and the boy. You think they’ll be trouble if you come away with me?”

“Yes,” the dragonborn said. “Havilar’s glaive is as good as her right hand. She’s quick and she moves with the battle—difficult to hit. She tells me the boy has the blessing of Torm, though he’s not a true priest. His magic doesn’t work always, but if it doesn’t come, he’s likely passable with his sword.” Something flickered in him, threatened to break through the charm, but failed. “But it’s Farideh who will help the other two stop you,” he said. “She is clever enough to combine them, to lead them when they’re afraid or reckless. And she has a pact with a devil.”

Rohini laughed. “Does she now? Well, perhaps she and I could strike up a bargain. Who does she work for? What sort of powers does she have?”

“She creates fire out of nothing. She makes it rain brimstone. She can vanish from one place and reappear a distance away in a burst of smoke—”

Rohini swore, and Mehen stopped reciting. She looked back over her shoulder at the two tiefling girls tying each other’s aprons. A devil-pacted warlock was one thing, a Malbolgian-pacted warlock was another—and the last spell the dragonborn had named was

special to Glasya's powers. This would take some caution, lest Rohini's plans come apart and Invadiah remove her altogether. The last thing she wanted was the godsdamned *pradixikai* swooping down on her careful work. She'd simply have to find the pact maker and have the girl removed.

"I don't suppose you know this devil's name?"

"Lorcan."

Rohini went as cold as if she'd been thrown bodily into a chapel full of priests casting blessings. "Lorcan?"

The dragonborn nodded. "She says he's a cambion, but what I know is he looks like a young man, but with a devil's form. Wings and horns and such."

"I know what a cambion is," Rohini snapped. If Invadiah's son was in Neverwinter, was he there to aid the erinyes? Or undermine her? Or just undermine Rohini? Had Farideh been the one who'd jostled Mehen from his domination? This wasn't part of the plan.

"Does she tell you what Lorcan says to her? What he asks her to do?"

"Sometimes," the dragonborn said. "Sometimes she tells her sister, and Havilar tells me. And what she doesn't tell Havilar, she keeps to herself."

"Then you don't know what Lorcan wants or where he has himself hidden."

The dragonborn shook his head. "He came when the orc attacked, and then left. I don't trust him."

"You shouldn't." Rohini scowled. Bargaining with Invadiah's spoiled son would be an enormous waste of her time. The cambion would probably think he had some sort of leverage. But if she didn't, there was always the chance she was going to rile Invadiah. What was he up to?

Perhaps he was up to nothing—perhaps she should be asking about Invadiah.

She considered Mehen a moment, wondering if it was worth having to dispose of the tieflings and the human, to risk Invadiah's anger or subterfuge, to get a dragonborn for Anthus's servitors. It wasn't.

Rohini smiled.

"You mentioned there were orcs?" she said. He nodded. "Are there more in Neverwinter Wood?"

"Swarms," the dragonborn said. "Scouts from Many-Arrows, they say."

"Perfect," Rohini said.



The Hall of Justice was not a Tormish temple, not really. But looking on it, Brin still felt as if he might throw up.

Before the catastrophes that had rocked Neverwinter, before the Spellplague that had remade the world, the Hall of Justice had been a temple to a god called Tyr. But Tyr had died—as so many gods had in those days—and his priests found their prayers unanswered. The temple beside the river had stood the century since, the plasterwork giving way here and there to time, earthquakes, and the furious volcano.

Then came Lord Neverember, who took over the temple as his own and filled it with new priests whose god was still listening, to soften the fact he'd commandeered the temple. There were holy champions inside now, performing the rites to Tyr alongside those of Torm, and more guarding the doorway, but it was not a Tormish temple. Not really.

Brin still hesitated at the opposite side of the road.

Even if there are Tormish priests and paladins in there, he told himself, they aren't Tormtar. They wouldn't be the brutally efficient sort of holy champion he knew from the Citadel. In fact, Brin felt pretty certain that if Constancia came to the Hall of Justice looking for him, she'd first dress down the two plinth-heads slouching on either side of the door and giving the medusa-eye to passersby. They were holy champions, by the gods, they could bloody well stand up straight! If her squire brought her a breastplate that dull, she'd give him a nail brush and an hour to remedy it!

Brin shuddered. Ye gods, if he came back smelling of puke Havilar would never let him hear the end of it.

Nothing for it, he told himself. He needed to make sure Constancia found him. He'd already gone to the southern gate and told the guards his name—his real name—where he was, and that he was expecting his cousin to arrive. They'd chased him off for pestering them, but they'd remember if Constancia showed up asking.

The Hall of Justice seemed the next likeliest place she might go—but would she, if there was a bounty on her head? Would she take the risk?

Should Brin be taking the risk?

He thought of the orcs, of the way he'd panicked when the twins appeared, of Constancia's perpetual expression of disappointment. Now was not the time to be a coward. He took a deep breath and started to cross the road.

The door to the temple swung open as Brin reached the foot of the stairs, and of all people, Tam came out. He spotted Brin, and an almost maniac look overtook the expression of disconcert he'd worn.

Brin started to turn, but the silverstar was quicker. He grabbed Brin by the shoulder and stopped him in his tracks.

"Ah," he said. "My assistant. Come along. I need your help with some rituals." He steered Brin on the road north, toward the river. Brin went along, too startled to fight at first and then a bit relieved he wouldn't have to face the Tormish priests.

"Why is it," Tam said once they'd gone a ways, "when I ask after a young man of your description traveling from Cormyr, does the ranking priest of Torm turn gray and ask that I bring you in to speak with him? *Please* don't do me the discourtesy of telling me you don't know," he added as Brin started to speak.

Brin shook Tam's hand off. "Fine. I don't intend to tell you. Better?"

"Much," Tam said. "I'd rather you be honest than assume I can't spot a simple lie."

"I did all right before. You were perfectly happy to believe I was just some lovestruck idiot."

Tam chuckled. "It made more sense than what we have here."

“More sense than a silverstar traveling to Neverwinter for ‘a few days’ on the Harpers’ coin?” The road came to a bridge, a wide stonework pathway traced with carvings of fishes and sea life. They shouldered their way through the foot traffic. “I don’t see why you’re asking about me, anyway. It’s not your business.”

“Everything that doesn’t fit is my business,” Tam said. “Are you going to explain yourself, or let me guess?”

Neither, Brin thought. He was back to wanting to vomit. “Where are we going?”

“The Blacklake District. I told you. I need a hand with a ritual,” Tam said. “Your accent’s what’s troubling me. I’ve known Cormyreans enough to hear that your vowels are short, but not short enough. You don’t use much of the Suzailan slang. But you have the cadence down. And the manners.”

“My tutors would disagree,” Brin said.

Tam stopped and pulled Brin to a stop beside him at the end of the bridge. Brin’s stomach started doing flips. “Answer me one question, and do me the courtesy of honesty,” Tam said, all seriousness. “Are you fleeing Netheril?”

Brin nearly sighed in relief. Netheril, the shadow empire north of Cormyr, had swallowed whole nations in its expansion. They worshiped Shar, the goddess of loss and the ancient enemy of Selûne, and generally had the rulers of every other nation on their toes and hoping their successors would do something about the Empire of Shade. If that was all the silverstar was worried about …

“No,” Brin said. “Only in the sense that I’m farther from them here than there.”

Tam pursed his mouth. “One hopes. Come along.”

At the end of the bridge, a strange sort of procession crossed their path: a small man, his fine lightweight suit soaked through with sweat, followed by two other men, similarly … damp. It was hot, to be sure, but even the tieflings in their heavy cloaks didn’t sweat so much. Brin tried not to stare and failed.

The last man in the line, a lanky sort of fellow, turned and looked Brin directly in the eye. His own eyes were colorless. Eerie. They

gave Brin the sense he was staring into the space between the stars somehow … like a hole between worlds …

Tam grabbed ahold of Brin's shoulder again, and Brin blinked. The effect was gone.

The man turned away, and the procession passed on, up the crossroad toward a row of houses, leaning precariously over the sluggish river. They disappeared into the third one, a bluish monstrosity that looked as if it were being held together only by luck and a whim of the Weave. But like the man's eyes, there was something strange about the building. Something wrong.

"Stay away from there," Tam said too lightly, "would you?"

"Do I look a fool?" Brin asked. He looked back at Tam. "What were they?"

"I don't know," Tam said, heading again into the shattered quarter. "Based on what I've seen in this city, I don't believe I wish to know."

Brin hurried after him. "You can't riddle me with questions and then turn around and drop vagaries like that. What do you mean?"

"When a city gets as old as Neverwinter, old powers entrench themselves in all the gaps and crannies." He slowed, scanning the broken buildings and piles of rubble that replaced the rebuilt structures. "And when a city this old *falls*, that just makes the gaps and crannies much, much larger. If there *aren't* Netherese agents here, I'll be surprised. If there aren't worse things—"

"What's worse than Netherese?"

"That's what I'm here to find out."

Brin watched him a moment. "Are you really a Harper?"

"I couldn't tell you if I were. Are you really a holy champion?"

Brin scowled and didn't answer.

A few blocks on, a patch of ruins had been cleared, leaving behind a large, more-or-less flat plot of land, waiting to be built upon. Tam paced it out and found the approximate center.

From his pack, Tam took out four sticks of incense, smelling of sandalwood and vinestars and shimmering faintly silver.

"Here," he handed them to Brin. "Put them in the corners of the square." As Brin went around the plot and pressed them into the

corners, Tam followed, murmuring prayers to Selûne and lighting the incense in smooth, ceremonious gestures. Then, he sat down, cross-legged at the center of the space and beckoned Brin to join him.

"Do you know this ritual?" he asked. Brin shook his head. "That's all right. You've assisted before with other rituals? It's not much different. Just call down what power you can from Torm and add it to mine. I want this one to last as long as possible."

"Will they mix?" Brin said sitting down across from him. "Torm and Selûne?"

"Of course." Tam shrugged. "Might change the look of the place a little, but nothing dramatic. Close your eyes."

Brin tried to clear his mind, to focus solely on the scent of the incense, the sound of the blade on the whetstone, the weight of duty … and not the concern that the men from the eerie house were something worse or that Constancia might catch him and drag him back to *do* his duty or that there were Netherese hiding in the shadows. He started to pray, the hard tones of the prayers to Torm mixing with the soft, cyclical chant to the powers of the Moonmaiden, Selûne.

An hour passed. Brin did not notice. Only that suddenly, the incense burned away and the sun was no longer hot on his back. He opened his eyes.

Instead of an empty space, the cleared land now held a temple made of marble and trimmed with silver foil. He and Tam sat in the middle of the temple, rows of backed benches facing an altar below a skylight that would let in the light of the full moon when it rose that night. Over the altar, a statue of a woman with long white hair and a patient smile stood guard, framed by seven silver stars.

"Is that what she looks like?" Brin asked, standing.

"Yes," said Tam, coming carefully to his feet, "and no. I've not seen her face, but the ritual creates the statue, so in a sense, she decides. Does it look like someone …" He turned and trailed off.

It was missing some of the more obvious features. But if you added horns, the swell along the brown, the solid eyes …

The statue of Selûne looked suspiciously like the tiefling twins. Tam studied the statue, his brow furrowed.

"What does it mean?" Brin asked. "Is it a warning?"

Tam pursed his lips. "It means something's brewing. Where are you staying?"

"The House of Knowledge."

"I suggest you head on back there," Tam said, still frowning at the statue, "and start thinking about where you're going to go next."

CHAPTER TEN

NEVERWINTER

13 KYTHORN, THE YEAR OF THE DARK CIRCLE (1478 DR)

FARIDEH WAS A PROBLEM. AN UNKNOWN.

No, Rohini thought, watching the girl as she scrubbed heavy sample jars. Not so unknown. The coincidences laid atop each other, too thick to be ignored: Lorcan's warlock in Neverwinter. Lorcan's warlock, who traveled with a dragonborn who thought she was his daughter. *Invadiah's* son's warlock, who always seemed to be watching Rohini.

Rohini leaned against the wall and gnawed at a thumbnail. Too many coincidences meant *something* was brewing.

It must be Invadiah. If Invadiah wanted to keep an eye on Rohini, her son's pretty-faced tiefling would make a fair spy. But Invadiah would surely know Rohini would suspect something the moment the tiefling's connections came out—and there was no scenario where they wouldn't come out. Rohini was nothing if not thorough. *He has a Toril Thirteen*, Invadiah had said, had *taunted*. She should have seen this coming.

But then there was Lorcan: How did Lorcan fit? Would he try to undermine his mother? Would he have tried to undermine Rohini without Invadiah's prompting? As far as Rohini knew, not a devil in the Hells who knew of Lorcan thought he was anything but useless, the reason Invadiah had no more offspring—she didn't want another one like him.

But if he had a Toril Thirteen … well, you had to be a little clever to manage that, Rohini knew. Was he clever enough to play a fool and slip beneath the notice of most of Malbolge too? Was he clever

enough to train his warlock to act like a babe in the woods? How clever did Invadiah know he was?

The question of what to do with Farideh was no different, a matter to be most thorough and thoughtful about. To kill her would send a message to Invadiah. Better still, to dominate the warlock and make her act according to Rohini's will. Make her kill Lorcan. Make her feed Invadiah the sort of lies that would label Lorcan an oathbreaker. Invade her form and take her to the Hells, an assassin with no will and a disposable body.

I will show them what they've miscounted in me, Rohini thought. I will punish the erinyes for all they've—

Rohini calmed herself. Those were ancient thoughts, suited to another era, another battle. The erinyes were not the succubi's enemies, however they antagonized one another now, however they'd clashed in the Blood Wars before. It might sting to defer to the erinyes as her betters, but it was far, far better than being the wisest demon in the chaotic Abyss.

And the fact that the same Ascension that granted the erinyes mastery over the succubi also took away the erinyes' wings—and their beauty—soothed that sting a little.

A little, but not much.

For if someone tore the truth out of the secret center of Rohini's thoughts, there was nothing she wanted so dearly as the promotion that would transform her into an erinyes. She would take their ugly hooves, their heavy fangs, their monstrous forms for the proper fear and respect they garnered. To be a succubus was to be overlooked. To be thought mad and weak. To be deemed a devil's whore. Even Rohini, who they rightly feared, who Glasya honored with a mission into Stygia, still sat low on the devils' precious hierarchy for being *only* a succubus.

For the moment. She would miss her wings. She suspected all the erinyes did.

Rohini kept watching the girl, who for once was not looking at Rohini, but looking back over her shoulder at her twin twirling the broom like a polearm.

It seemed lately that every time Rohini looked up, there was Lorcan's tiefling giving her a troubled stare. Though, she admitted, it was possible that it was the other one some of the time. She couldn't seem to tell them apart. One has a glaive, she thought. One has a rod. One has the gold eyes, one has the silver one.

What either was watching for, Rohini couldn't fathom. To another eye, the girl would seem perfectly innocent—but Rohini knew better. Who had ever heard of a guileless warlock? There was no point in such a thing.

Rohini chewed her lip. Whatever was happening, it was anything but simple.

Much as it boiled in her brain, Rohini had other, more important things to attend to. She would have to decide what to do about the girl later.

Farideh looked over at Rohini then, held her gaze a moment and nodded in acknowledgment, as if she'd known all along Rohini was watching. As if she knew what the succubus was thinking.

Rohini nodded back, accepting the challenge. Farideh could make things as complicated as she liked; Rohini was anything but simple herself.

Havilar didn't care for Rohini or her ideas about good uses of time and building character, but she had to appreciate the hospitaler's punctuality. The very second Rohini headed down the corridor, Havilar knew she wouldn't be back for ages. She shoved her broom into a corner, blurted an excuse about needing to use the privy to Farideh, and went to the kitchens instead. She snatched a clay pitcher full of water and a couple of mugs and brought them to the courtyard on the other side of the temple.

Brin, covered in sweat and stone dust, looked up as she came out and smiled. "Did you get it?"

"No, I couldn't find Mehen." Havilar set the pitcher and glasses on one of the larger blocks and pulled herself up beside them. The courtyard was as large as one of the sick rooms she'd been made to

clean and littered with shattered rocks and pieces of glass and molding. A pleasant breeze stirred the air, and the only sound was a robin chirping on the roof. “Rohini probably has him up on the roof, she’s so good at giving people *exactly* the wrong chore.” She poured water for both of them. “I had to *sweep* and *mop*. Meanwhile, Farideh Fumblehands is washing knives and glasses and things for the healers. And you’re hauling stone.”

“Ha ha,” Brin said. “Better than sweeping.”

Havilar smiled. She hadn’t *lied* when Farideh asked if she were fond of Brin. “Fond” was an awfully strong word, after all. But she was so tired of Farideh’s gloomy attitude. She’d slipped off yesterday to see him, and had fun for a change. She was starting to wonder if Brin might be fond of *her*. Or at least, more fond of her than he was of Farideh. And when she teased him, he always laughed.

“Are you going to tell me why you wanted the bounty form at least?”

He shrugged. “I just wanted to see it again. It’s funny, I started thinking maybe I imagined it. Maybe it’s not really Constancia.”

“Maybe. It’s a common name, is it?”

Brin shrugged again. “I don’t really know. She’s the only one *I’ve* met, but I … I haven’t met all that many people.” He stared glumly at the ground between his feet. “How much are you getting for her?”

“A thousand, I think. Pretty good, but then, no one really offers a bounty until they’re desperate enough to offer something worthwhile. It *is* a bit odd that they don’t specify her crimes. What did she do?”

Brin sighed. “Nothing.”

“Real nothing or you-don’t-want-to-say nothing?”

“She … she was supposed to be keeping an eye on me,” he said. “And we had an agreement—she wouldn’t accompany me everywhere if I’d report in at regular intervals and not avoid my tutors. It was just between us. And … I took advantage of that.”

Havilar wrinkled her nose. “I don’t blame you. Why’s she got a bounty then?”

“Our family’s probably angry. I suppose we both betrayed our oaths.” He paused. “She took care of me. She’s always taken care of me, in her own way. She’s not … Constancia’s not like a mother. She’s rule-bound, obsessively focused, bossy, ill-tempered, and she never listened when I told her.… Well, she might have been difficult, but I never wanted to get her into trouble.”

“She sounds like Farideh,” Havilar said, and then wished she hadn’t. “How come you don’t have a bounty?” Brin turned scarlet, and Havilar giggled. “Don’t worry. I won’t hunt you down.”

“It’s complicated,” he said after a moment. “It’s my family.”

Havilar thought of Farideh, her pact and her snotty attitude and the fight with Mehen. “Say no more.”

Brin chuckled. “You make it sound as if you have things so rough. But you three stick together. Mehen’s never told you … I don’t know, that you *had* to be a milkmaid. That you’d be a disappointment if you weren’t a milkmaid. That your whole reason to be on this plane was to be a milkmaid and you were flouting the gods themselves if you didn’t want to be a milkmaid.”

Havilar thought of the way Mehen had pressed her to take up the glaive—it had been everything she wanted, and she’d never questioned it. But she’d also never *thought* about being a milkmaid or a merchant or a traveling bard.

Maybe you can find some other daughter who isn’t such a disappointment. That was just Farideh’s fit of temper, but suddenly Havilar wondered if Brin and Farideh had more in common than they realized. A sick feeling of nerves crept across her lower back, and her tail started lashing.

Brin flushed again. “I suppose that’s just how it works. You sacrifice things for your family even when they drive you mad, because they’re your family and you couldn’t bear to see them get hurt.”

“Yes,” Havilar said quietly.

“Thank you for the water.”

“You’re welcome.” She grinned at him, though she didn’t feel cheerful just then. “No whiskey in the kitchens.”

He chuckled, but he didn't sound like he meant it either. "Havi?" he said after a moment of unbearable silence. "Do you know anything about Selûne?"

"She lives in the moon?"

Brin shook his head, as if she'd gotten the answers wrong. "Sorry. I know you.… It's just I saw Tam yesterday, before you came, and he has this statue—"

"Oh," a new voice said, "pardon me."

Havilar reluctantly looked back over her shoulder at the robed half-elf standing in the entryway. The priest smiled hesitantly at them and came a little closer.

"I didn't know we had any 'new recruits' working out here," he said. "You're doing a fine job." He gave them a little bow. "I'm Brother Vartan, the head of the researchers here."

Havilar and Brin introduced themselves and answered Brother Vartan's questions about what had brought them there, where they were from, and such. They kept coming. This was *not* how Havilar had expected things to go. But then he started in on their religious educations.

"I'm Tymantheran," Havilar said flatly, knowing it tended to end such discussions quickly. It did not.

"Ah, a fragment of Abeir," Brother Vartan said. "My work is largely focused on the Spellplague, you know, and the deaths of the gods. I don't suppose you were ever near to the Plaguewrought Land?"

Havilar shifted. "I don't know where that is."

"Are you familiar with the Order of Blue Fire? You really ought —"

"I was brought up in service to Torm," Brin interrupted. "And … Helm and Tyr, of course, were frequent subjects of … study … with their mantles being … er …" He turned to Havilar. "Havi, why don't you go find Farideh. I'll stay and chat with Brother Vartan. You can come get me later and we'll all have supper."

Havilar drew back, as startled as if he'd shoved her off the block. Brother Vartan was already excitedly yammering about dead Helm

and dead Tyr and other bloody planes, and Brin was nodding along as if the lecture were worlds more interesting than she was.

"All right," she said, her tail still lashing furiously. She slid off the block and went back into the temple.

Worse, he wanted her to find Farideh. She might not know anything about dead gods or other realms, devils or even boys—but she knew enough to know that was a terrible sign.



Farideh pulled the last of the glass retorts from the scalding rinse water and set them, ends up, on the drying cloth to steam themselves dry. She wiped her hands on the cloth she'd wrapped around her waist like an apron, then tossed the cloth beside the glass. Her hands and arms were dry and flushed from the hot water and soap. For all Havilar had whined about sweeping, Farideh would have gladly traded her.

"Havi?" she called out as she walked into the adjacent wardroom. It was empty but for a few acolytes packing small crates of supplies —a dark-skinned boy, a half-elf girl with a bright red braid, and a young dwarf with a spiky beard. They stopped talking when she called out. Farideh stopped in her tracks. "Oh. I'm sorry," she said. "I thought … I was looking for …"

"Sorry?" the girl said with a chuckle. "Watching gods, you're polite. Nothing to be sorry for." She looked at Farideh's scalded hands and clucked her tongue. "Oh, you were on wash duty. Laundry or laboratory?"

"Laboratory," Farideh said, pulling down her sleeves to hide the brand marks.

"I'll bet Rohini didn't even tell you about the salve. Josse? Would you?"

The boy pulled a small tin off one of the high shelves. The girl popped it open and scooped out a daub, beckoning Farideh closer. She grabbed hold of Farideh's hands and smeared the greasy yellow paste into them. It smelled of beeswax, lavender, and sulfur.

“Stinks a bit,” the girl said with a smile, “but your hands will be glad for it. I’m Anda, this is Josse, and that’s Eberk. You’re not ‘Havi,’ so you’re … Feria?”

“Farideh,” she said, rubbing the salve into her chapped hands. “Thank you. Well met.”

“Did the Order send you?” Josse asked. “Or one of the other temples?”

Farideh shook her head. “We’re not acolytes. Rohini offered us work. We’re only in Neverwinter for the moment.”

“Good,” Eberk said with a scowl. “Enough to do around here. Temple’s falling down around our ears, Helm’s Hold’s taken on the interestin’ casualties, and Brother Vartan’s got a mind to close the Chasm, replace all the windows, and bring dead Mystra back for the rededication asides.”

“We’re going to Helm’s Hold now,” Anda said. “Supply trade. If you’re done with your chores, you’re welcome to come along.”

“Oh!” Farideh flushed, pleased and embarrassed. “No, I’m afraid I have … other things to attend to. But thank you. Another time.”

Anda shrugged, oblivious to how rare and special the offer had been. “Suit yourself.” They set the lids on the packed crates and filed out of the room.

Another time she would have gone with them, Farideh thought, poking her head out into the corridor and searching for signs of Rohini or Havilar. But not now—she had more important things to do.

For the first time since she’d reached Neverwinter, Farideh was alone.

She didn’t bother to stop by her room, to grab her cloak or her rod or her sword. If she had, she might have run into Havilar or Brin or Mehen and they would want to know where she was going and why. They’d all have reasons for why she shouldn’t go, for why she should do things differently.

None of that matters, she told herself, not for the first time. She was going back to speak to the shopkeeper, to find a way to get control over her own pact. She didn’t need others weighing in on that.

The day was still young and fiercely bright. The newly plastered buildings glowed with the summer sun and the clouds overhead sped by as if they didn't want to block the sun too long. People crowded the streets, heading to and from shops, construction, and the woods beyond with baskets, tools, and braces of game. Farideh plunged into their midst.

Farideh still wasn't used to walking in Neverwinter, to passing in the streets as if there were nothing odd about that. Perhaps it was that way in all large cities, perhaps it was only Neverwinter. Regardless, people's attentions—if they ever settled on her—seemed to take her in and then let her go. She was as inconsequential as anyone else, and it made her a little giddy.

With so many people around, Lorcan ought to continue leaving her be. She slid a hand up her sleeve and ran her fingers over the raised shapes of her brand. Nothing. He hadn't so much as needled her in two days.

She ought to be glad, to have the space to seek out other warlocks, to think about changing her pact without Lorcan pressuring her. But she was worried. He'd never gone so long without making himself known.

Maybe Mehen is right—the thought flitted through her head before she could stop it, and she pursed her lips. Mehen was right about some things: Lorcan was dangerous. Lorcan was less predictable than she'd like. Her life would be simpler if she weren't a warlock.

Mehen still wasn't speaking to her, and it left a heavy, twisted feeling in her stomach. They'd fought before, he'd cursed her stubbornness before—but never like this. She'd run into him that morning, as she carried dirty linens to the laundry.

"Good morning," she'd said quietly. "How did you sleep?"

Mehen had looked at her blankly, as if he weren't certain she was actually there at all. As if he didn't care what she had to say.

She forged ahead anyway. "I'm sorry. About the other night. We should have told you Brin did the healing. It seems silly now, but at the time … I didn't want you to be angry at him. And you were already angry at me, so … that seemed easier."

Mehen stared at her, cold and silent. He rocked slightly on his feet.

"Are you all right, Mehen?" she asked.

"No," he said in hard tones. She stepped back.

"Oh." She took another step back. "I suppose you're busy. Helping Rohini?"

"Orcs," he said. "In the wood." He glared at her with such intensity, that she flushed. He was still angry. He still blamed her.

She'd excused herself and bumped into Rohini, who'd smiled at Farideh in her cold, syrupy way and sent her off to wash the researchers' glass … and all the while stood in the next room and glowered and stared and made Farideh feel as if she were under a glass herself, before storming off for no apparent reason. There was something about Rohini that didn't sit well. Never mind, Farideh thought. Not your concern. Concentrate on fixing the pact. Concentrate on proving Mehen wrong.

Perhaps *Lorcan* was right—of course he was, he was always right. Mehen did think she was a fool and naïve. He saw the pact as akin to her handling a blade too heavy and sharp for her clumsy skills. But if she learned the spells to control it, if she leashed Lorcan a little better …

This isn't for Mehen's sake, she told herself. It's for mine.

As if there were anything she could do to change anyone's opinion of her anyway. Mehen was still furious. Havilar was still sulking and snapping at her for some slight Farideh hadn't figured out yet. Lorcan was ignoring her.

Which is what you want, she thought. Except it wasn't really.

Pulled in two directions, her only hope was to find a path down the middle. Her only hope lay in the shop before her, with the yellow door and the sign that read "Claven's Armory and General Goods."

Farideh looked at her hand on the door handle.

You can still change your mind, she told herself. Lorcan's wicked smile overwhelmed her thoughts.

The bells on the door jingled as she passed into the shop.

The shopkeeper looked up from measuring out a length of rope for a customer and smiled at her. “Ah! You came back. I’ll be with you in just a moment. Kalam!” he called toward the back of the shop. A young man with a scruffy beard stuck his head out between the curtains, a book in his hand. “Would you mind setting a kettle on the fire for tea? And then why don’t you take a break, walk about in the fresh air and get something to eat.”

The young man glanced at Farideh and raised his eyebrows. “Of course.” He ducked back behind the curtain, and Farideh kept herself busy and her thoughts calmer admiring the potions on the shelves. The sunlight bouncing off the polished floors caught in the potion of vitality she’d picked up before like a slice of the summer sky. Beside it, bottles of a thinner red liquid shimmered through each other, deep as rubies.

“Welcome, welcome,” the shopkeeper said as the bells rang again. “I’m so *pleased* you came back. Admiring my wares, hmm?”

“They’re very lovely in this light,” she asked. “Are they all for healing?”

He tapped the side of his nose. “All the ones out here. Come, come. I have tea and some cakes you’re welcome to. But first, I’m Yvon Claven.”

She smiled nervously. “Farideh.”

“Well met, my dear.” He ushered her behind the curtain and pulled out a chair at the small table there. As Yvon brought tea and cakes and cups and saucers, Farideh looked around the large back room. On one side, high shelves packed with boxes reached to the ceiling, and a rack hung with armor in need of repair dominated one wall, each piece tagged with names of owners and blacksmiths. The farther side of the room was given over to leatherworking, and hides of a dozen sorts waited to be shaped into armor. She peered at the grayish hide draped over the table, and wondered what sort of monsters one hunted in Neverwinter.

“You must have a thousand questions,” Yvon said, sitting down. “But I insist you have a cake before you start.”

Farideh took one gingerly, all too aware of the thin gruel she’d had for breakfast. “Thank you. I do have so many questions. But

one is more pressing than the others. It's about my … Lorcan, my devil."

"Oh?"

"He is …" She searched for the proper term. "A bit aggressive. I want to keep the pact, but … I cannot keep on the way we have. Is there anything I can do?"

"Of course," Yvon said. "You're free to change your pact. I suspect it hasn't mentioned that?"

She shook her head. "How?"

Yvon poured the tea. "Find another devil. Preferably a stronger one, in case it gets it into its head to hold on. But you'd prefer that anyway—there always comes a time to move up.

"Or," Yvon added after filling his own cup, "you can kill him. He'll come back eventually, but usually they're vain enough to stay away. Still, you ought to get a replacement—no sense in tempting fate." He chuckled to himself. "Lector's first pact was with an imp, of all things. It took him years to get rid of it. He ended up having to lure it into a temple of Amaunator where their priests sorted it out. Sugar?"

"Oh. Yes. Please." He dropped two brown lumps into the tea—it had been a long time since Farideh had had sugar, or tea for that matter. She wrapped her hands around the mug.

The steam rising out of her cup curled like the shapes of her brand. She nibbled on the cake thoughtfully. A stronger devil. It wouldn't be Lorcan. It might be a devil who left her alone. It might be someone who she didn't have to worry about saying no to. It might be someone who gave her more impressive spells. It might be better.

And, too, it might be worse. She wouldn't be so foolish as to say Lorcan was good, but she was not worried that he might force her to do anything unspeakable. Yet. All else aside, she knew Lorcan.

"Is it possible … Do you think there's a way to keep the same devil, but … tighten its reins?"

Yvon smiled and sipped his tea. "No. As far as the devils are concerned, *they* hold the reins. And in a sense, they do. If you try to reason them out of that mindset, at best you're only arming them

with ways to needle you. The key, it seems, is not to hand the reins over too easily." He gestured for her to drink her tea and put another biscuit on her plate.

She sipped reluctantly. The tea was bitter and earthy under the sugar, and it burned her tongue a little. Kill Lorcan, take on a different devil's pact, or continue as she was. They were not the choices she'd hoped for.

"It isn't easy," Yvon said. "And to think you've been going at it all alone." He clucked his tongue. "At least you have a little power, yes? It's not as if you're stuck with Lector's imp."

"A little, yes," she said. She broke a piece off the biscuit and pressed it nervously to crumbs between her fingers. "I know most people would say it's foolish of me, but … most days, I'm glad of the pact."

Yvon leaned forward and gave her a very solemn look over the rims of his spectacles. "I wouldn't say you're foolish for that. After all, without the pact, you wouldn't have seen the truth of the wider world, the path to true power."

It was a strange way to say it, but Farideh supposed he was right. If she hadn't taken Lorcan's pact, she would still be in Arush Vayem, she would never have seen a Neverwinter full of tieflings, she would not know she was capable of protecting a caravan or trapping a bounty.

"And I would guess this Lorcan is the one who introduced you to the Raging Fiend?"

Farideh set her cup down and frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"Asmodeus. The king of the Hells. We often prefer his epithet."

"Oh." *The king of the Hells' own blood runs in your veins.* "Yes. I mean, I knew some things. Before."

The bells over the door jingled as a customer came in. Yvon shook his head with a weary smile. "Business intruding on pleasure. I'll be just a moment." He stood and passed through the curtained door.

We often prefer his epithet. Farideh sighed. There was so much she didn't know about warlocks. A whole way of speaking of devils, for

one. She wondered if Lorcan's lady had such an epithet. She took a bite of teacake.

When she heard the rasping voice from the front room, her mouth dried up, threatening to choke her on her mouthful. "I'm looking for people. Not things. A boy, a dragonborn, and a pair of tieflings."

"Oh?" Yvon said. "Friends of yours?"

Farideh stood too quickly, scraping the chair against the floor, her heart in her throat. The voice continued, "One of the tieflings wields a glaive. The other has a silver eye. Have you seen them?"

"Perhaps. I believe I saw two tieflings of that description just the other day. Young ladies?"

"Yes. Where are they?"

"I must admit I don't know," Yvon said. "Are they *friends* of yours?"

Farideh crept to the curtained door, angled her head so she could see through the sliver of a gap between the pieces of fabric. She pressed a hand to her mouth to keep from crying out.

The orc from the forest, the one who had shot Havilar, the one who returned in her nightmares, stood in Yvon's shop, a naked axe in his hand. Yvon listened to him as politely as he had anyone who came into his shop, giving no clue that he might have noticed things weren't quite right.

The orc curled his lip. "Good friends. You tell me where they are."

"As I said, I don't know." Farideh felt her shoulders drop. At least Yvon knew that much. "But I believe I can be of some assistance to you. You see, they were looking for someone I am acquainted with. If you'd like, I could bring you to our mutual friend right now, and he might be able to shed some light on where your friends lie."

The orc peered at Yvon, as if he didn't quite believe his luck. He turned the axe over in his hand several times. "Now?"

"As soon as I get my things."

The orc snorted. "I'll be outside." The bells jangled again, and Farideh stepped back from the curtain just as Yvon came through. The kindly expression had grown tight.

"I don't need to ask if you know him," he said.

“He tried to kill me,” she whispered, shaking her head. “He almost killed my sister. I don’t know why he’s hunting us.”

Yvon squeezed her arm. “It will be all right. We’ll take care of him, don’t you worry. I had hoped to invite you to our gathering this afternoon, Farideh, but under the circumstances, I think that is a poor plan. Come along.” He ushered her through the closed door, down a set of stairs, and through a dark cellar room that felt as if it were much larger than the building upstairs. Yvon led her through the dark without hesitation, and aided her up another flight of stairs. He unlocked a second door and held it wide as she exited into a small yard with a quartet of chickens and a dozy donkey.

“Wait here a bit until I’ve led him away.”

“You must be careful—”

Yvon held up a hand. “You’re not to worry, remember? We can handle him. Now, later on, after nightfall, if you’d like to come back, we’ll have a more informal meeting right here. You can meet Lector and the others. And I’ll let you know that your little problem is taken care of, all right? We protect our own.” Farideh nodded and stepped back.

“Keep clear of the wood for a few hours,” he added, and he shut the door tight.

“Why?” she asked, but the door was closed and Yvon was gone. Why should she stay out of the wood? Why should she even think of going into the wood? Perhaps he was going to get the garrison and they would sweep the forest for more orc assassins. Perhaps Yvon’s friends didn’t want to worry about her seeing them kill the orc. Perhaps they were worried she was too new to use her powers. She remembered the orc’s cruel eyes and shuddered.

Yvon had told her not to worry, but she had a very bad feeling that things were going to turn out differently than he’d expected.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MALBOLGE, THE HELLS
THE PALACE OF OSSEIA

LORCAN OPENED THE PORTAL TO THE NEEDLE OF THE CROSSROADS and stepped from the courts of Amn to his mother's treasure room in the Hells. Bloody djinn, he thought. What a mess. At least he'd managed to convince his Phrenike heir to get out of Calimport. There might be a half-dozen others like him, but Lorcan had better things to do than hunt down another one and convince him to take up the pact. A day or so of reminding the Phrenike heir what he stood to lose, what his foremother would have done, what Lorcan was going to do if he didn't start packing his things before the bloody genasi realized they very much wanted the Phrenike heir dead—well, it had been time better spent.

And it had kept him busy and away from the scrying mirror.

He stood before the iron mirror and scowled at his reflection. As crowded as Calimport and Amn were, he'd had no choice but to alter his appearance. The face that looked back at him was built on the same bones as Lorcan's, but he didn't look like himself. His skin was no longer red, but a middling tone that was acceptable most everywhere on Toril. His hair a dark, murky blond. His eyes were still black, but the whites that surrounded them made him look as if he were goggling like an idiot. No horns, no wings, no pointed teeth—everything devilish stripped out of him, and only the human left behind.

And, he thought glancing down at the back of his hands, though it wasn't supposed to, the spell that shifted his appearance hurt like the Hells. He reversed the enchantment slowly, wincing against the

pain. It took him nearly a quarter hour to change back, and left him sweating and sore—but still, it hurt less than doing it quickly. When he opened his eyes, the backs of his hands were red again. He sighed. Someday he ought to put a little more effort into learning that spell properly.

But not today. Fidgeting with the scourge-pendant, he waved the activating ring over the mirror. After that night in the forest, he'd decided to leave her to her own devices for a while. See how she liked things without her "sword."

With any luck, Goruc would have caught up with them, dealt with the priest, the acolyte, and Mehen, and Farideh would be nothing but grateful to see Lorcan turn up again.

The mirror's surface swirled. It started to form a mountain road. Then stopped, swirled again. Started to form the gates of a city. Stopped. Swirled. The city again. A broken-down temple. A street. The city.

And no Farideh.

Dread coiled in his stomach. Goruc would not have gone against him, not after seeing all Lorcan threatened. Lorcan waved the ring over the mirror again. This time it showed him Goruc, wild-eyed and storming down a street, his axe still clearly in hand.

Lorcan cursed under his breath and waved the ring over the mirror. This time the image closed in on a building—a shop with a large sign he had no time to read—before leaping back to the gates.

"Godsdamned, piece of—"

"Troubles, Lorcan?"

Lorcan cried out and spun around, fire in his hands. Rohini raised an eyebrow at the spell—a spell that would not so much as singe a succubus.

"Not at all," Lorcan said, more calmly than he felt. He shook the flames out. "You surprised me."

"Not as much as you surprise me."

Lorcan eyed her a moment. Rohini's voice was no longer a purr but a growl, and she looked more ready to physically tear his heart out than to break it. "What do you mean?" he said carefully.

"What is your warlock doing in Neverwinter?" she asked.

“Neverwinter?” he said, trying hard to sound puzzled. The mountain road. The city gates in a towering wall. Oh, shitting Hells, Farideh, he thought. No, no, no!

“Invadiah didn’t tell me you were involved.”

“I’m not,” he said. “If one of my warlocks has gone off to Neverwinter, it’s simply a coincidence.”

“A coincidence?”

“There are a lot of cities in the world. Is there any *reason* she shouldn’t be in Neverwinter?”

“You know damned well there is,” Rohini said. She jabbed a taloned finger into his chest. “You pretend like you don’t know or care what happens in the Hells, but you haven’t fooled me at all, half-blood. You know Invadiah’s plans. Are you acting on her orders?”

“I know you’re in Neverwinter,” he countered, stepping back, “and I know Mother’s very unhappy with you. And I don’t want to know more.”

“I think you’re waiting to see how things fall out so you can swoop in and grab the glory.”

“To what end? I have more to lose and nothing to gain. I’m not playing your games, succubus.”

She leaned in close, baring her teeth before speaking in barely a hiss. “Then why are your toys all over my board?”

He shrugged, trying to look insouciant. Trying to look like the careless, accidental son of the most powerful erinyes in Malbolge and nothing more. “As I said: coincidence.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“I expect you’ll believe anything I tell you to believe,” he said, harder. “Because I’d hate to tell my mother you destroyed one of my … ‘toys.’ ”

Rohini narrowed her eyes at him. Lorcan’s stomach turned to ice, but he kept his smirk. Rohini had to know Invadiah would let her take the blame if things went awry. She had to know Invadiah was waiting for the merest excuse to cast off the skulking and infiltration Rohini favored for a frontal assault. She had to know—

Rohini slapped her hand down in the center of Lorcan's chest, sending a wave of agony coursing through him. He gasped and before he could stop her, she did it once more. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground.

"You understand," she said, "that it would take nothing—*nothing*—for me to convince you to go find the biggest, most ill-tempered pit fiend in Malbolge and pick a fight? To waltz up to Glasya herself and call her treasonous? To throw yourself into the midst of your squabbling pack of sisters and let them tear you limb from limb?"

Lorcan kept his mouth shut. Whether she could or couldn't, he wasn't stupid enough to test her further. This was Rohini after all.

She kneeled down beside Lorcan and clucked her tongue. "You all think I'm just a tool, when I could kill you without a moment's breath. You, Invadiah, all her pretty little erinyes." She chuckled to herself. She leaned in and whispered into his ear, "If you know what's best, Lorcan, you'll do what I tell you. Either get your warlock out of my way, or give her to me."

"I'll get her out," he panted. "Give me some time, though. I can't scry her. The mirror is fighting—"

Rohini stood. "You have until I return to the temple."

He waited until she'd left, until the worst of the pain and the nausea had passed, before pulling himself up on the bone spurs of the room's corner. Bloody Rohini. He'd try a few more times, and surely Farideh would get out of the way of whatever was blocking the mirror. He'd call her through the brand, get her someplace secluded, and then travel to Neverwinter and make her leave. He waved the ring in front of the mirror.

A shop. A street. The shop again, and Farideh hurrying out from the alley beside it, glancing back at the front door, over which hung a sign that read "Claven's General Goods and Armory."

"Oh, shit and ashes," he whispered.

Forbiddances positively haloed the shop. Those spells had been what kept the mirror from scrying her—powerful magic that had no place at all around a random storefront. Lorcan's pulse hammered unpleasantly at him: nestled in the crook of one of the runes in the store's sign was a trio of black triangles.

The sign of Asmodeus.

Farideh had just left an Ashmadai lair.

He grabbed ahold of the mirror as if he could shake her through it. Stumbling into Rohini's way was bad enough, but this could make everything so much worse. He pulled hard on the tethers that connected to her brand. She had to get someplace quiet. Someplace he could get to her.

In the mirror, Farideh stopped in the middle of the crowded street, clasped her arm, and flinched. Lorcan pulled again and again.

Listen to *me* this time, he begged.



Farideh was threading her way through a crowd of people in front of a fishmonger when Lorcan pulled on her scar. It flared so hot and sharp she gasped and clapped a hand over it.

A woman in front of her, a human with large knobby hands, grabbed hold of her shoulder as she stumbled. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Thank you," Farideh said. But then the pull came again, so sharp it made her eyes water and again she gasped the fishy air. She pushed past the woman and out of the crowd, hurrying toward the House of Knowledge.

He called again, but if he wanted her attention he could come and ask for it. After days of leaving her alone, leaving her wondering what had happened to him, and, of course, what made him take notice of her was finding out she'd spoken to someone else about him and how to leash him better. She should have expected it.

The key is not to hand over the reins too easily, Yvon had said.

Again Lorcan pulled on the scar hard enough to take her breath, and Farideh stopped walking. Around her, the road was still busy with passersby, and off to the right a fountain in the shape of a wyvern swarmed with citizens and children and more than a few gulls.

Mehen often told her she was stubborn, a complaint Havilar often repeated. Farideh headed for the crowded fountain. For once, Lorcan would see exactly how stubborn she could be. She sat down

on the edge of the fountain, resolutely ignoring the insistant pain of her scar.



Mehen dreamed.

He was following the redheaded woman from the temple through a forest. Not a forest like Tymanther's scraggly mountains—heavy evergreens interspersed with bone white birches and monstrous oaks. Around their feet, ferns swished and shushed as they passed. The world smelled damp and resinous, like wet pine.

He remembered waking in the temple, preparing to go haul stone. He remembered the redhead—Rohini, that was it—coming to find him. He must have fallen asleep, though, since he couldn't make himself ask her where they were or what they were doing. He couldn't do much at all but follow along after the hospitaler. He hated the dreams he knew were dreams yet couldn't wake from. But at least Arjhani and Uadjit hadn't made an appearance yet, to drag up everything that had happened so long ago.

Rohini turned to him.

"Stop," she said, and he did. In his dream, she looked strange—stronger, fiercer, almost bestial. She grinned at him, but it looked more like she was baring her teeth.

"We're going to fight some of those orcs you mentioned," she said. "But I need you to avoid killing them. I want as many as possible alive."

"Of course," he said.

"And another thing," she said. "I won't look like myself. So mark me—if you hurt me, Mehen, I will hurt you back."

Confused, he regarded her. He didn't want to hurt Rohini. He couldn't hurt Rohini. He drew his falchion, and bowed over it to her, his new commander.

"Good," she said. Her form wavered and for a moment, she seemed to have wings and talons, her hair a cloud of bloodred. He blinked and he found himself looking instead at a lean and muscular male orc, his face crazed with deliberate scars, his dark hair tinged

red. Her face? Her hair? No, it was simpler to call the orc as he looked—young, male, and oddly handsome.

Somewhere deep in his mind, Mehen sighed. This was going to be a long, strange dream.

“Lead on,” he heard himself say.

The Rohini-orc strode through the brush, making no effort to dampen the sound of his passage. Even in his dream, Mehen knew where to step and how to slide around the densest brush. Even if Rohini didn’t care, it was his way.

The squad of orcs crouched around a low fire, finishing the remains of a midday meal. Twelve of them. Half nursing wounds that could not be more than a few days old. All males, but one—a shaman decked in totems and packs of herbs. She was as big as the males though.

At the sight of the Rohini-orc, those who could took up their weapons. At the sight of Mehen they leaped to their feet and Mehen recognized them—it was the remnants of the same group they’d clashed with on the road. Judging by the biggest one’s bellow, they remembered him too.

The Rohini-orc said something in a language Mehen didn’t know, and the big orc cut short his war cry. A few more words and he regarded the Rohini-orc cautiously and curiously. The shaman stared openly and eagerly.

To kill them would be simpler. Clustered like this, if his falchion could reach one, it could reach them all. If they attacked the way they had on the road, there’d be no discipline in the rush—if any of them were archers they’d forgo the bow for the swords and axes that lay at hand, instead of scurrying into the brush. He wondered how hard one could punch an orc before one might kill it.

The Rohini-orc noticed the shaman’s attentions and chuckled. He turned to her and murmured something. The shaman blushed, and Mehen wished he could snort or roll his eyes.

The shaman abandoned her fire and took a place beside the Rohini-orc. Two others of the group also rose to stand beside him. The big leader stomped and howled as they did, baring his big tusks and beating the face of his shield with his sword.

“Now,” the Rohini-orc said in Common, “is where you aid me.”

The leader lunged forward, and suddenly Mehen found himself standing between the Rohini-orc and the leader’s sword. He brought his falchion up to block. The orc’s rough blade caught against the hilt, and Mehen threw him off.

Two more orcs stood, one with his arm in a sling, one with a bandage over his forehead, but neither too wounded to defend their commander. The first’s axe clanged against Mehen’s breastplate, knocking his breath from him. The second was a little smarter with his sword—the blade dipped in behind the plate and cut a deep gash under Mehen’s stronger arm.

The leader roared again, but Mehen slammed his good elbow into the orc’s chin, armor crashing into bone. The orc’s head snapped back and he stumbled. Mehen swung his fist, the falchion’s grip still in it, forward and into another’s sternum, then swept the blade of the weapon across the third, shearing through the hide armor and into his belly. That one probably wouldn’t make it.

The world shifted again and once more he was between the Rohini-orc and another blade, but this time the attacker moved too fast and the blade slid up toward Mehen’s face, cutting a line across his cheek and ear frill. Mehen roared in sudden pain, but his exhalation came with a burst of lightning.

The lighting leaped from the attacking orc, to a pair of wounded seated on the ground, and up to the orc he’d attacked before. The two wounded collapsed, as did the orc he’d first attacked. He hoped they weren’t dead. Rohini would be displeased.

The only orc still standing was the one with the sword who’d stabbed Mehen behind his breastplate—a wound which was steadily bleeding and making it harder and harder to hold his heavy falchion.

Mehen dropped the blade and pulled a pair of daggers from his belt. The swordsman grinned—with those little blades, Mehen would have to get right up close to do any damage.

“Come on then,” Mehen growled.

With a bellow the orc pulled his sword up and swung it down, aiming for—no doubt—the gap in Mehen’s pauldron. Instead,

Mehen threw up his arm and stepped into the strike.

The swordsman's blade came down hard on Mehen's wrist guard, and the impact shook the dagger from his hand and rattled his arm all the way to the shoulder. But Mehen kept his focus: for that split second, the swordsman's focus was on his victory and not on protecting himself. Mehen's off-hand dagger darted in and plunged up to the hilt in the swordsman's ribs, with the soft hiss of a punctured lung. The orc goggled at Mehen, and then slid to his knees. Mehen wrenched the blade free, and sliced it across the orc's neck—a quick death for a quick warrior, he thought.

"Three dead," the Rohini-orc said. Even as an orc, his voice was musical. "I expected better." He shook his head. "I hope for your sake, Mehen, that they take well to the Chasm."

"Your forgiveness," he said. Why was he apologizing? He shook his head. Pain radiated up his arm and across his chest.

This wasn't a dream. "My wrist is broken," he said, regarding the awkward angle in a dazed sort of way. His breastplate was full of blood too.

"Don't think I don't appreciate it—" The Rohini-orc stopped as Mehen hefted his falchion once more and pointed it at him.

"What is this?" Mehen demanded. "Where am I?"

The orc clucked his tongue. "Don't you remember?" he said, and suddenly it wasn't an orc standing there but Arjhani.

It's not Arjhani, his mind insisted. You haven't seen Arjhani in years.

But all the same his heart knew no one else could be standing in front of him, giving him that wry look he knew all too well. No one else had those brassy scales. No one else made Mehen's heart collapse with the words, "I thought you were helping me. Have you changed your mind?"

"No," he murmured, as the dream took hold again. "Never."

Sairché had to wonder if Lorcan had noticed her trick yet, as often as she'd been using it. Invisible, she slipped in behind Rohini

and watched as the succubus threatened her brother. She settled down on the same chest of drawers and waited as Rohini left and Lorcan picked himself off the ground and started swearing at the mirror again.

Neverwinter, she thought. Interesting. She hoped the warlock Rohini was so furious about and Lorcan was still swearing at was the same one she wanted. Neverwinter made an excellent smoke screen.

The only trouble was that Lorcan wasn't leaving. She waited longer than she liked for him to step away from the mirror, before she dropped her invisibility. "Do you need some assistance?"

Lorcan looked up, scowled, and hurled a bolt of magic at her. Sairché ducked and it hit the living wall with a faint squeal. "Stay out of it," he snapped.

"Mother's coming," she said cheerfully. "Looking for something. I passed her on my way. You may want to consider scarpering off."

Lorcan's scowl didn't shift. Only when the thunder of Invadiah's hooves approached, did he reach for the charm on his shoulder. With a ripple of magic, her brother vanished.

Inelegant, Sairché thought, resuming her own invisibility. But more interesting.

Invadiah burst through the door a moment later. The still-active scrying mirror caught her attention, and she froze, scanning the room in a slow sweep. As her gaze passed Sairché, the cambion plucked one of the gold coins from the pile beside her and flung it at her brother.

The coin hit Lorcan right across the knuckles. He cried out and let go of the charm. Invadiah whirled on him.

"What," she growled, "are you doing in my treasure room?"

Lorcan shook his wounded hand. "Looking for you?"

"Get out."

"Of course, Mother. But before I do, you might want—"

Invadiah seized him by one arm and hurled him bodily from the chamber. Sairché covered her mouth to keep from laughing. Too perfect indeed. Invadiah pulled a great urn of some sort out of one of the larger piles and stormed from the room.

She had hardly passed the threshold, but Sairché was up and dragging a heavy battle-axe from the corner. As the door shut behind Invadiah, Sairché threw the latch and felt the handle move beneath her hand as Lorcan tried to turn it.

Sairché heaved the battle-axe up and jammed the upper edge of one blade into the soft floor, so that it lay across the door, its haft wedged against the bony corner of the entry. The handle shook as Lorcan tried to open the door, but the axe and the lock held.

"I'll only be a moment," she called.

In the mirror, the tiefling warlock sat beside a fountain, looking around as if she were waiting for something. People swarmed all around her, but Sairché was ready for that. She'd pulled her wings down around her shoulders and draped her cloak over them, tying it shut. With the hood up, she'd pass well enough as a tiefling, as long as no one looked closely.

And if anyone looked closely, it was no skin off Sairché's nose to vanish right then and there.

The Needle dropped her in an alleyway, half blocked by stacks of cut stone tiles, out of sight but not *too* far from the wyvern fountain. She crossed the street with a determination she knew would keep people from looking to closely, and planted herself in front of the tiefling girl.

"Well met," she said. The girl looked up with those odd eyes, startled. She searched Sairché's face and seemed to recognize her. The cambion grinned.

"I'm Sairché," she said, "although I'm certain Lorcan's already told you all about me."

The girl regarded her with a stoniness that Sairché had to admire. She was wise enough to be afraid, and wiser still to hide it. Skilled too—if Sairché had been a mortal, she might have thought the girl wasn't cowed.

"It's polite," Sairché said, sitting down beside her on the edge of the fountain, "to give your name as well."

"Is it?" she said.

"Yes. Especially"—Sairché gestured at the people around them, particularly at a knot of tiefling children racing back and forth

trying to grab at the leader's tail—"when in unfamiliar company?" She drew a bead of magic, the beginnings of a spell, to her fingertips. "You don't want to insult me, do you?"

The girl hesitated. "Farideh."

"Well met, Farideh," Sairché said. "Waiting for Lorcan?"

"Something like that."

"Do you like being his warlock? I imagine he's rather tiresome. All flash and temper."

"I don't know. I've no one to compare to. Why are you here?"

"To get to know you better, of course." Maybe give you someone to compare to." Sairché leaned in closer as if sharing a secret. "He's never mentioned," she asked, "why you?"

Farideh shook her head. "I said yes?"

Sairché smirked. Such a foolish answer. "Anyone can say yes. But a warlock is a bit of a burden, isn't it? You don't *want* just anyone."

Farideh watched the street and didn't respond.

"There are essentially two kinds of devils who pact with warlocks," Sairché said. "Harvesters and collectors."

"Those sound the same."

"Only because you don't know what they mean. Harvesters are after souls. That's the price of the pact, or sometimes they spend their efforts corrupting their charges." She shrugged. "They find it amusing. But the result is that their warlocks are not meant to be in the world long, especially if they're not corrupting anyone new. Collectors"—and she gave Farideh a long, appraising look—"are after sets. They want warlocks that match. Certain traits. Certain bloodlines. Certain circumstances. Gets them a little prestige in certain circles."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Lorcan has what's called a Toril Thirteen. Thirteen warlocks descended from the original thirteen tieflings who made the Pact Infernal with Asmodeus himself. It's a tricky set, as you can imagine."

Farideh plucked at her cloak. "He has twelve other warlocks?"

Sairché grinned. Poor little lamb. "Indeed. But he seems to spend an awful lot of time around you. I wonder why that is? I'm not an

idiot," she said gently. "You're not his paramour. The fact that he thought I'd believe that means either *he's* an idiot … or he's desperate." She leaned in closer to Farideh. "I have a guess," she whispered.

"Oh?"

"I think he's desperate to hide you," Sairché said. "There's a very rare heir among a Toril Thirteen. The descendent of Bryseis Kakistos, the Brimstone Angel herself. Only three other devils have collected Kakistos heirs. Lorcan must have one. I think it's you."

"And?"

Sairché chuckled. "And if that's you, you have quite a little bargaining chip my brother's been keeping from you. There are collectors scattered across the Nine Hells who would do … well, anything *you* wanted to be sure, to gain an heir of Bryseis Kakistos. Lorcan is no one. Whatever he can give you, he's already done—and that was begged, borrowed, or stolen."

The girl searched Sairché's face, as if she were trying to decide whether to believe her or not. Oh, Lorcan had her good—but he had counted on her never finding out about Bryseis Kakistos, Sairché wagered. On no one ever offering Farideh something better.

Farideh pursed her lips and looked away, off toward the north. "Four," she finally said. "There are four of … us?"

Another good reason not to keep warlocks, Sairché thought. Mortals focused on the damnedest things. "Three and yourself. You have some long-lost cousins out there, I suppose. Is that it?"

Farideh shook her head. "It's not as many as I would have thought. There must be lots of devils looking out for … that sort of heir. A Brimstone Angel."

"Loads," Sairché promised.

"Is there any way to block their eyes?" She swallowed. "I mean, if you didn't want to be overwhelmed by collectors."

"Possibly," Sairché said. "But I don't see why you should. There are plenty more suitable options for you. Why not consider them all?"

"I'll think about it." She stood as if to go.

“What’s there to think about?” Sairché said. “The sorts of devils that want a Kakistos heir include the peers of archdevils.” She stood too, and looked down her nose at Farideh. “Unless … you have *other* reasons for staying.”

Farideh shook her head, her expression distant. Perhaps Sairché had read her wrong. “It simply isn’t the sort of thing I intend to jump into again. Good day.”

Sairché hooked her arm into Farideh’s before the girl could stop her. “I’ll see you home. We can talk on the way, as you must have a hundred questions for me. You’re staying in that old temple that Rohini’s holed up in, correct?”

“How did you—”

“The best thing about temples,” Sairché said, her voice low and gossipy, “is that the scrying glass my brother’s so fond of doesn’t work so well through the blessings. You’ll be safe inside.”

“I’m …” She looked down at Sairché’s arm. “I have some errands to run before I return there.”

If she thought to flee with such a pitiful excuse, she was mistaken. Sairché had only a short time before Lorcan found a way to Neverwinter, and she’d better have his warlock set on leaving before then. Sairché squeezed Farideh’s arm more tightly. “Then I’ll come along with you.”

“Just a little farther,” Yvon called back to the orc, who’d told him rather brusquely he was called Goruc. He looked up at the sky, gauging the passage of time: they would be early. He smiled to himself and wondered if Goruc would take that as a comfort or a threat. The path widened into a little grove, and Yvon gestured broadly at the empty space. “And here we are.”

The “grove” Yvon brought Goruc to was no such thing: it was a single pine tree. In the center, the oldest trunk rose up, so thick three men together could not stretch their arms around it. From that trunk, snaking branches, warped by spellplague and themselves as thick as birch trunks, had become roots, plunging back down into

the needle-strewn ground, and giving birth to new trunks that sent out new root-branches.

Yvon found himself a seat on one of the low-slung trunks and watched as Goruc spent several moments winding his way around the spellscarred pine, his eyes tracing connections between branch and trunk as complex as any cavern map.

He came around the main trunk and his gaze dropped to the level of his face. Yvon smirked to himself. There was a symbol burned into the tree, overlapped by fresh branches. Goruc reached out and pushed aside enough of them to show … three triangles arranged to form a larger triangle. He frowned and ran a finger over the charred wood.

There was a rustling from the other side of the grove. Yvon kept watching the orc.

Goruc went completely still. He gripped the axe in both hands and edged his way around the thick trunk, scanning the shadowy wood. “What was that?”

Yvon shrugged. “A squirrel? How is it you know the tieflings?”

Goruc’s eyes kept moving over the trees and the shadows created by the low sun. “Got a mutual acquaintance.”

A branch moved behind him.

Goruc spun. Yvon kept watching him.

“Your friends coming soon?” the orc asked.

“Soon,” Yvon said. “What sort of mutual acquaintance?”

“A patron,” Goruc said. He whipped his head around at another rustle of movement. “If you’re trying to trick me with all this, I’ll make certain you regret it.”

A flash of red between those two trunks. Like a bit of cloth waving behind a person as they ducked behind a larger tree. Goruc bared his teeth and leaped toward it.

He bared his teeth. “Show yourself!” Goruc bellowed. “Come out or I’ll kill the shopkeeper.”

Nothing.

“You’re awfully stirred up,” Yvon said. “I thought you wanted our help.”

Four figures, draped in bloodred robes, stepped from the shadows. Loose hoods obscured their faces, and each one wore a sash emblazoned with the same sign: three triangles forming a larger one, surrounded by a figure with nine sides.

"These are your friends?" Goruc demanded, still holding his axe high.

"Yes," Yvon said, standing and finding his place in the circle. "Mine and the tiefling's you seek." He shook his head sadly. "But I don't think they're yours."

"That's a very nice axe," the figure standing on his left said. "Wherever did you get it?"

"A gift," Goruc said. "What are you playing at?"

"Really?" the largest figure—unmistakeably Creed—said. "A very generous gift. One might even say it was quite the steal."

"Where are the tieflings?" Goruc shouted.

"Yes, that," Yvon said. "With a bare axe in your hand and, pardon the expression, that beastly demeanor of yours, I don't think we'll be pointing you in her direction. Your patron shouldn't be toying with the disciples of the Raging Fiend."

Goruc chopped wildly at the robed figures. But they all stayed precisely out of reach, still watching him from the shadows of their hoods.

"Stay back!" he yelped. "You come any closer and—"

"In due time," Yvon said. "Who sent you to find the warlock?"

"I have a right no matter what he says," he said. "She killed me twice."

The fourth figure chuckled. "Well," a female voice—Sekata—said, "obviously she needs some practice. A fortunate thing we've had plenty of that."

Goruc started to reply, but behind him, Yvon was quicker. The garrote twisted around the orc's throat. Yvon smiled as Goruc clutched at the garrote, but he still would not drop the axe. He struggled and gasped, and tried to swing the axe over his head. Yvon released the garrote and jumped out of the way.

Imarella's whip lashed around Goruc's right wrist, and yanked that arm backward and the axe away from Yvon. In front of the orc,

a robed figure stepped forward and raised a hand.

"*Adaestuo,*" Lector said. The crackling blast of magic caught Goruc in the center of his chest, knocking him off-balance. Creed stepped forward and cracked a club against the back of Goruc's knees and he crashed to the ground, flat on his back and staring up at the cold stars through the contorted limbs of the plaguechanged tree.

Goruc started to roll to his feet. Lector slapped an amulet against his cheek. "*Maollis.*"

The orc convulsed once and his arms and legs went limp and stopped obeying him, long enough, at least for the Ashmadai to hold him down.

Sekata's stake pierced the wrist of the hand that held the axe so quickly his scream came after the crack of dividing bones. Yvon took one of the iron staples from Creed and helped pin down the orc's ankles, as Sekata drove another stake through the orc's off-hand.

"Why?" Goruc screamed. "Why?"

"We protect our own," Yvon said, his voice still gentle.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Neverwinter

13 Kythorn, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

Havilar edged down the hallway, her right foot leading, her glaive held low. She scooped the edge upward, guiding it with her left hand and driving it forward with the thrust of her hip. Angle down to slice across her imaginary foe's throat. Sweep across his shins. Then lift, plant the right foot on his knee, and drive the blade home.

There was hardly room inside the temple for her to practice—every room had beds or tables or piles of books in it, and nearly every room had a scowling priest or acolyte giving her disapproving glares for bringing her glaive through the door. Even the library in the basement, where *nobody* went, still had that horrid little librarian who'd shrieked at her, called her a barbarian, and chased her out.

She thought of his face as she jabbed forward again. Barbarian, indeed. If she didn't practice, her muscles would go soft, and forget how to control the long, heavy glaive she'd spent so long practicing to wield. If those priests were clever enough to be healing people and archiving books, they should be clever enough to know that much.

It had taken the better part of the day, but at last she'd found the long, wide corridor in the still-damaged part of the temple. Unlike the rest of the temple, no one rushed up and down it. The tapestries still hanging on the walls were thick with old soot and dust, and trimmed with cobwebs. Nobody but spiders to tell her to go elsewhere.

Stupid acolytes, she thought, resetting her grip. They thought she was an idiot or a child with a toy. Even if she wasn't as smart as Farideh, she wasn't stupid. Just like Farideh wasn't a complete waste in a fight, even if Havilar was much better with a blade. It wasn't as if one of them got everything and left the other one without.

Except sometimes, she thought with a scowl of her own. Everyone they met lately seemed to like Farideh better—that man in the shop, the red-haired nurse. Stupid Lorcan, she added, even though it made her sound even more childish. Brin.

She planted the glaive and rested. Stupid Brin. She didn't want him under her skin. It was just that he'd rushed her out of there, off to find Farideh. That's all.

That's all, she told herself more firmly.

Even though Farideh protested it wasn't true, she got to be the smart one and the one people trusted, but Lorcan made her the interesting one, too, and the one who might be dangerous. Havilar and Kidney Carver might as well not even exist.

Eater of Her Enemies' Livers, she remembered, and wrinkled her nose. Perhaps Farideh was right. Perhaps that did sound pretentious. She needed a shorter name.

" 'Justice,' " she said scrutinizing the weapon. " 'Cutter.' "

Bad and worse.

"Devilslayer," she said. Everyone would probably appreciate it if she could fight Lorcan to the death. Except Farideh.

Half a year had gone by since Havilar had called down Lorcan, and too much had changed. Farideh had gotten so short with her. Farideh slept fitfully—awake, her mind would just drift off, Havilar could tell by the way she would suddenly be staring at nothing at all, as if all the treasures in the world were somewhere in the middle distance. Farideh might be as private as she could with Lorcan, but Havilar wasn't stupid. She'd seen the way Farideh looked at him. And still, she thought she could tell Havilar what to do.

She made another series of passes down the corridor, and was about to turn around and work her way back, when she heard the

murmur of voices a short distance off. The sunlight from the broken windows did not penetrate all the way down the hall, but Havilar padded into the graying shadows, toward the sound, the newly christened Devilslayer at the ready.

Some twenty yards on, the corridor took a sharp turn to the right. Havilar peered around the corner. At the opposite end of the hall, a door led into a room which had seen almost as little use as the corridors. Brother Vartan sat in a chair that had been draped with some sort of heavy canvas. Rohini stood beside him, practically vibrating with energy.

Something was odd about the hospitaler, something Havilar couldn't quite put her finger on. It was as if she were there … and yet she wasn't. The nervous energy she exuded seemed almost as if it were shaking the edges of her. It made Havilar's eyes ache.

"They are perfect," she was saying.

"And … controlled?" Brother Vartan asked.

"Of course," Rohini said merrily. "Perfect, as I said."

"It's just that I'm concerned. If something should happen—"

"*Nothing* will happen," Rohini said. She set a hand on either arm of the chair and leaned forward. "I swear it." Then she kissed him, hard, on the mouth.

Havilar wrinkled her nose. Was there really nowhere better to tryst than the filthy, dusty room? Maybe Rohini was desperate to keep anyone from finding out. Havilar might not have thought Rohini was all that pretty, but she was sure Rohini could do better than a bore like Brother Vartan.

But Havilar's eyes fell to the canvas-draped chair, to the place where Rohini gripped the fabric on the armrest. To Rohini's nails, which had been neatly trimmed and clean, and which were now the color of blood and the length of iron spikes.

And as she watched and as Rohini pulled away from Vartan, her nails shrank back to being neatly trimmed, clean, and pink. Havilar sucked in a breath. Rohini cocked her ear and for a moment, Havilar was certain she'd heard. She gripped Devilslayer, ready to spring into a defensive stance.

But instead, Rohini smiled down at Vartan. “Perfect,” she said once more.

“Perfect,” he agreed.

She opened a door on the other side of the room and ushered in five orcs, armored like the ones Havilar had fought when the caravan had been raided, and painted in the blue, dancing magic of the Chasm. Wafting tentacles of blue fire surrounded one. Another wore gauntlets of the stuff, which wavered and bulged as if they were made of water. A female seemed to be covered in hard blue spikes, like a dire wolf. Havilar could not make out the other two—there was too much magic swirling in that room—but she could see the taint of the spellplague had marked them all.

And not a one was fighting Rohini as she led them out.

“Here we are,” the hospitaler said. “Five perfect specimens for you to bring to the Sovereignty. Just as you suggested.” She walked down the line of spellscarred orcs. “Your notes were surprisingly accurate. I only lost four.”

Vartan stood, looking over the orcs as if they were weapons fresh from the forge—greedy to make use of them, but well aware if he tried he’d regret it.

“They’re exactly what you imagined,” Rohini said. “Take them to the proxy now, and think about that. They’re perfect for what the Sovereignty needs. You were very clever to come up with them. Tell them you have more where they came from, and other gifts besides if their masters are willing to parlay.”

“They are,” Brother Vartan said, looking confused nevertheless. “I was.”

“Then hurry back and tell me what those disgusting aboleths say. We’re on a timeline now.”

Brother Vartan nodded thoughtfully. “How … do I bring them?”

Rohini smiled, and it sent shivers down Havilar’s back. “They’ll follow you,” she said. “They’re very pleased with the current state of events. Aren’t you, my pets?”

“We will fight for the Sovereignty,” the tentacled one said in his low, growling accent. He slapped his shield with the flat of his

sword. “We will spill the blood of their enemies and those who flee will mark us all as a threat.”

“Yes, wait until they ask.”

Whatever the Sovereignty was, whatever an aboleth was, these things had nothing to do with the running of a hospital, Havilar was sure. Spellscarred orcs had nothing to do with a hospital.

And Rohini—

Rohini opened the door she’d led the orcs in from, and herded them and Brother Vartan back out. As she turned, she looked out into the hall, directly at Havilar. She laid a finger to her lips in a gesture of silence.

As she did, the fingernail became again a weapon and Rohini’s eyes flared red and fearsome.

Havilar took a step backward, afraid to look away from Rohini and find her suddenly near and testing Havilar’s glaive’s new moniker. Rohini didn’t look away either, and it wasn’t until Havilar had backed into the shadows of the hallway that she turned and ran.

She had to find Farideh. Farideh would know what to do with a devil who changed shape. Havilar raced back to the room she’d left her sister in on the other side of the temple.

Farideh was not there. She wasn’t in any of the rooms they’d been set to clean. She wasn’t in the wardroom where the acolytes lingered. She wasn’t in the little bedroom they shared with several ancient wardrobes.

Worse, her rod and sword lay on the bed. Her cloak was missing.

“Oh gods,” Havilar whispered. She leaned her glaive against the wall and picked up the rod. It was weighted like a mace, toward the tip, but not as heavy. A terrible, taut feeling seized her stomach. Surely Farideh wouldn’t have gone out without a weapon—but where was she if she hadn’t left? What if Rohini….

She clutched the rod to her chest. “Oh Fari.”

The surrounding rooms had more old furniture or books or were locked tight. She pushed open the second to last in the hallway, dread pooling in her heart. The room was dark—the broken windows had been boarded over and only cracks of light shone through. Someone moved within. Someone big.

“Mehen?” She moved toward the shadow. The person was rocking on his heels, ever so slightly. She held the rod tighter, and hoped Farideh didn’t mind if she had to brain someone with it.

The shadow shuffled into the light from the corridor and Havilar made out russet scales and familiar armor. She cried out in relief and threw her arms around Mehen’s neck.

“Gods, I thought I’d never find anyone!” Mehen didn’t answer, so she kept talking. “We have a problem—a big problem. Rohini is a devil, and you’re the only one I can find! We have to get out of here, but I don’t know where Fari or Brin or anyone is. I’m afraid Rohini has them.”

Mehen said nothing. Didn’t even chastise her for being overexcited. He stood, rocking on his heels.

“Mehen?” Havilar asked. “Mehen, are you all right?”

“He’s fine.”

Havilar felt a hand—small but strong—close on her shoulder.

“Pity,” Rohini said, “Lorcan’s not here to help you this time.”

And something alien seeped into Havilar’s mind before she could point out Lorcan had never really helped her.

To kill the orc took until well after the sun had gone down, but the longer the sacrifice took, the more intense the power it created, and by the time he no longer screamed but made small hissing whimpers, Yvon was still wide awake and flush with the power of the sacrifice.

“The final stroke,” Sekata intoned. She pulled back her robe so the orc—had he eyes still—could see her angled, elf face. She pointed the ritual knife point down, and glanced around at her confederates.

“Take off your hood,” Yvon whispered to Creed.

“This is perfectly ridiculous,” Creed said, but he did as he was bade, revealing his own solid black eyes and pointed horns.

“It is part of the ritual,” Lector said.

“It’s a stupid part,” Creed said. “He can’t see us.”

“The entire ritual is critical,” Imarella whispered, her tail lashing in annoyance. “Or do you want our offering to the Supreme Lord to be for naught?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Creed said. “I—”

“Shut it!” Lector said. “You’re lucky we even asked you back.”

Sekata cleared her throat. “The final stroke!” She plunged the blade down into the erratically beating heart of the orc.

A sudden swell of black and silver energy swelled over the hilt of the blade, spitting and crackling.

Then abruptly, it coalesced and shot skyward, a missile of death. Sekata leaped backward. Creed covered his face. Imarella was so startled she backed into one of the tree’s root-branches. Yvon and Lector stared up at the sky as the crackling bolt faded out of sight.

“That,” Creed said, “is not part of the ritual.”



Again, Lorcan threw himself shoulder-first into the door. Again, it flexed and shivered, but did not budge. He stretched his jaw, the joint popping back into place after being so long clenched. Bloody Sairché.

She’d had time enough now to activate the Needle, to find Farideh—he didn’t doubt Sairché would seize the opportunity and damn the consequences. If she hadn’t simply appeared in the middle of all those people, she’d at least walked right up to Farideh and … and what? Would Sairché be so incautious as to kidnap his warlock?

He leaped at the door again. Again it didn’t move. Lorcan roared and kicked the portal hard enough to make it ooze.

An imp popped into existence beside him. “Are you Lorcan?”

“Not now!”

“Soul of yours is in dispute,” the imp said. “It was named Goruc Darkeyes?”

Lorcan fought the urge to kick the imp down the hallway, and kicked the door instead. If someone else wanted Goruc, they could have him. “Well, if there’s a prior claim, I cede,” he said.

“No,” the imp said. “A subsequent one. The Supreme Lord’s barbezu are claiming primacy. Starting trouble down by the Styx. The archduchess’s barbezu are spoiling for a fight and I think they might just tear the soul apart so—”

“He’s *dead?*” Lorcan cried. A number of curses fought their way out of his mouth, but none seemed quite graphic enough to capture his fury.

He channeled all of it into a blast of magic so intense it made the door scream. It charred half the portal to the bone and burned the jamb away with a smell revolting enough to make the imp behind him gag. He slammed against the weakened door again and it gave under his rage, knocking over the heavy axe that Sairché had shoved up against it.

The imp flapped in behind him. “If you wish to dispute the claim —”

“Tell His Supremacy to keep the shitting orc!” Lorcan snarled. “And you get out of my sight.”

There in the mirror, Sairché was walking beside Farideh, who had a stony expression that said she clearly knew Sairché was trouble. He’d seen that look enough.

“Good girl.” He waved the ring before the surface. The mirror had no trouble pinpointing Goruc, or at least what was left of him, spread-eagled on the ground in the mud of his own blood. Over him, twisting branches of a strange tree filtered down the moonlight. The axe still lay clutched in his dead fist.

Holding the image of the twisted grove in his mind and spitting a steady stream of curses, Lorcan activated the Needle. He wasn’t taking chances on who found Goruc’s body. He’d drag that sorry orc back from the grave if it meant stitching his body back together himself. Asmodeus could claim him after.

When Yvon bent to help the others take up the body, something gleamed at the edge of his vision.

“Hold.” He leaned over the corpse of the orc, peering at the viscera as if there were a secret message scribed upon them. He felt his cheeks flush, and his pupils open as he searched for the faint traces of diabolic magic. Something was definitely there. Someone or something had definitely made a claim on this orc.

Which meant someone in the Hells must have sent him after the warlock girl.

He looked at Lector and pushed his spectacles back up his nose.

“This one is marked.”

“He’s one of us?” Lector demanded.

Yvon peered at the orc a moment more. The twisting marks of the Hells were faint and hard to divine. Beyond sight, beyond touch, beyond any sense—and yet somehow with all of them, after long years of practice, he could perceive those identifying traces. These were particularly odd. But certainly not of Asmodeus or his legion of followers.

“No. Someone else’s.”

“A warlock?” Sekata said.

He shook his head. A warlock’s brand was much stronger, much more tightly connected to the Hells, even if it wasn’t so easy to sense where that connection lay. This was more like a net around the orc’s soul than a lead.

“What then?” the elf woman demanded.

“It …” Yvon squinted at the remains. “It is hard to say. It wasn’t a willing mark. Or a very powerful one.” He plunged one hand into the wet mess of the orc’s organs and squeezed his heart, gently, as if testing the ripeness of a peach. Ah—there. The patterns were distinct, and he’d felt this one before. “Sixth Layer,” he said after a moment. “He was a Glasyan.”

“So,” Lector said. “An orc marked by Glasya sought to openly murder an Ashmadai adept.”

Yvon raised a finger. “A warlock,” he said, “and a supplicant. She has not taken the mark of Asmodeus yet.”

“Always precise,” Sekata said.

Creed snorted. “Nevertheless. She’s a tiefling—and we’re *blessed* by the king of Hell—and a warlock bound to the Hells. And a

supplicant is still Ashmadai enough for bloody Glasyans."

"And," Imarella added, "he did try and kill us all." She nudged with one foot the axe that the orc still tightly clutched with one foot. Not once in the entire process had he loosed it.

Lector smiled wickedly. "The Glasyans have obviously not learned their lesson."

"Perhaps if there were fewer," Yvon said, "it would be a simpler lesson to retain."

"One moment," Sekata said. "Are you suggesting we go up against the Glasyans *again*? You're clutching at a creek here. All we know is that Glasya—or someone in her service—claimed his soul. That doesn't mean he's been acting on Glasyan orders." She wrinkled her nose at the orc. "Besides, I've never seen such an ugly Glasyan."

The female tiefling scoffed. "You would do anything to avoid your duty."

"Well, have *you* seen such an ugly Glasyan, Imarella?" She turned on Lector. "Mordai Vell told you not to go starting trouble with the rest of her cult without having good purpose. Said we were drawing too much attention."

"We were establishing the *proper* order," Yvon corrected.

"Both of you, quiet!" Lector said. "Sekata is right. We shall simply have to determine by usual means whether or not this signifies a return to the Glasyans' … obstinacy."

The portal at the edge of the grove opened with a gust of heat, hot enough to brown the needles of one of the nearest branches. A cambion leaped out. He took in the scene with a look of mixed disgust and confusion. His eyes fell on the robed adepts gathered beside the gutted orc and widened as he seemed to recognize the situation.

"Oh damn you twice over, you stupid orc," he said. Then he vanished.

But not before five pairs of eyes registered the pendant hanging boldly from his neck: the scourge of Glasya.

"Well," Yvon said after the portal had closed. "I think we can all agree that's a tidy enough sign?"

“Where exactly are we heading?” Sairché asked, her voice dripping sweetness.

“The chandler,” Farideh replied. “I hope you’ll forgive me. I haven’t been before.”

Sairché gave the ruined buildings around them a skeptical eye, and Farideh flushed. When Sairché had told her about Bryseis Kakistos, one thought overtook Farideh’s mind and steered her feet: keep Sairché away from Havilar.

If Farideh was so valuable for being this Bryseis Kakistos’s descendent, then so was Havilar—more so, because there was no Lorcan in the way of claiming Havilar. Farideh had only been thinking about avoiding the House of Knowledge when she crossed the Dolphin Bridge and entered the Blacklake District.

The buildings of Blacklake had once been much larger and much grander than anything on the other side of the river. They made for spectacular ruins and vast piles of rubble. Here and there, reconstruction efforts shored up an ancient mansion, and reclaimed lumber crisscrossed the proud facades of villas overrun by the opportunistic. There were no shops, as far as Farideh had seen. This would be the next bit of Neverwinter to rise from the ashes, but not for some time. She was running out of options.

Sairché didn’t know about Havilar, Farideh felt sure. Most of the time they walked, Sairché had kept up a nearly constant stream of chatter about all the ways she could improve Farideh’s situation. There was a smugness to the way she described powers Farideh didn’t have, devils Farideh didn’t know. Sairché thought she’d won already. She didn’t know there was another piece in the game, one that no one had played.

And *why* had no one played her? Lorcan had chosen Farideh instead, but he knew about Havilar. Was he, like Sairché, searching for a devil to pay the right price for his reserve Kakistos heir? Or was he keeping her for himself, ready for Farideh to snap or break or even just threaten to leave?

Havilar, who was reckless enough to summon a devil or run out into a strange caravansary or coax strange boys back to their room—what would a devil be able to convince her to do with careful words and subtle pressures? She thought of Lorcan's barely suppressed impatience—what would another devil do when Havilar refused to do what they wanted? She might be lost. She might be corrupted. She might be killed.

Farideh couldn't let Sairché find out.

"Your tour of the city is terribly droll," Sairché said as they threaded their way down another street littered with broken lava rock and slipped pillars, "but don't think I don't know what you're doing."

Farideh stopped walking. She didn't know. She couldn't. "Oh?"

"There is no chandler. You're stalling until my brother finds us." Sairché let go of Farideh's arm. "If you don't want my help yet, you only had to say so."

"Thank you," Farideh said, trying to keep her true gratitude out of her voice. "I'll consider it."

"Of course you will. Just remember: You will come back eventually. You will accept my offer. It's just best if you decide to do so on your own."

"Is that a threat?"

Sairché smiled. "Well, it's not an invitation to take tea. Now I'm sure Lorcan will have plenty to say when he swoops in to rescue you."

Farideh narrowed her eyes. "I don't need rescuing from you."

"Precisely," Sairché said. "I don't make messes like Lorcan does."

The portal opened between two fallen pillars, and Lorcan bounded out, looking fierce and frazzled. He spotted Sairché, and without a pause, pulled his wand from his belt and let a burst of flame loose at her. Sairché ducked away from it and behind Farideh.

"Fool," she said. "Fire's not going to—"

The second bolt struck the ruins behind her, and Sairché leaped out of the way as a rain of stones clattered down where she'd stood. Farideh scrambled out of the way. When Lorcan reached out to

catch her, Sairché sprinted behind him and through the lingering portal. With a nearly noiseless *pop*, it closed.

"Shit and *ashes*!" he snarled.

"Where have you been?" The words came out without Farideh wanting them to—a demand, a supplication, a plea for him to take control of this unbearable situation.

Lorcan said nothing, scowling at the space where Sairché had been, tense and angry and thinking of something else, someone else. Of course, Farideh thought. I'm just a piece in his collection. I don't matter.

"Where have you *been*?" In the braver corners of her thoughts, she didn't want to say any such thing. She didn't want him to save her, not even this time. But she couldn't forget that he had barged into her life nearly every day for the last half year on the merest of pretenses, and this time he'd left her with his wicked sister, who could take everything away. She looked down at her hands. They were shaking now that Sairché was gone. Sairché couldn't take Havilar.

"Solving larger problems," he said. He grabbed hold of her arm and led her to a more open part of the street. "We need to go."

"Where? Why?"

"Neverwinter's not safe. Not anymore."

"Because of Sairché?"

"No, because you're toying around with …" He bit off the words. "Stop asking questions and come along, darling."

She pulled away. "If it's dangerous, then I need to get Havilar and Mehen. And Brin."

"We don't," he said snatching at her, "have time for that. I'll get them later."

"If it's safe enough to leave them, then I can leave the normal way."

His anger made sharp pains lace her scar. You've given over the reins already, they seemed to say. There is nothing you can say to change that.

"I know about Bryseis Kakistos," she said.

“Bloody Sairché,” he all but growled. Lorcan’s mouth curled into a sneer.

“Well then, darling, you must know *everything*. You must know how to stop the Hellish civil war we seem to have set off, and how to crush the nest of vipers you’ve blundered into?” He grabbed her arm again, yanking her close. “Ashmadai and Glasyans, and goddamned Rohini, the biggest viper of them all—for such a wide-eyed girl you stumble on a lot of villains. You must know how to lock Sairché in the Hells away from my warlocks and turn back time to keep that orc from being sacrificed to the king of the Hells, since you know bloody *everything* now.”

“Orc?” Farideh said. She pulled free of his grasp once more. “What orc?”

The rage on Lorcan’s face slipped behind his flippant mask. “No one,” he said. “It’s a matter of politics. You don’t need to worry about it. What you do need to worry about is being in Neverwinter when the wrong people find out. So let’s leave.”

She twisted away as he reached for her.

“Don’t lie to me—”

“Come now, darling,” he said, the edge creeping back into his voice. “I’ve never lied to you.”

No, she thought, you only talk me into circles. Not this time.

“Did you send that orc?” she said. “The one who shot Havilar?”

“Of course not!” he cried. “Lords, what do you think I am? I have no interest in killing your sister. Let’s be on our way.”

She dodged him again. “To kill someone else? Did you send him to kill Mehen? Brin?” She hesitated. “Me?”

Once more Lorcan’s insouciance shattered. “You always think the worst of me,” he said. “What exactly do I have to do to convince you I’m not going to kill you? Obviously saving you from the middle of a Hellish civil war isn’t enough?” Farideh folded her arms.

“Answer the question, please.”

“I didn’t send an orc to kill you.”

“And the others?” Farideh asked, growing angry.

“I told you before, darling. What would I be doing with orcs?”

“Yes, you did say that. Did you send an orc to kill someone?”

But she didn’t need him to answer. What he wouldn’t say was answer enough: he’d sent the orc to kill Brin or Mehen or maybe even Tam, and even if he hadn’t meant for Havilar to be hurt, she had been.

Because Farideh hadn’t cast off Lorcan’s pact. There it was: Mehen was right. It had been her fault. Her flaw.

“It sounds like you’ve already decided my guilt,” he said. “I *did* come to your aid in the midst of that unpleasantness, or did you forget that?”

“You came,” Farideh said, growing angrier. “But it wasn’t because Havilar was in trouble. Or because I was in trouble, was it? You weren’t watching. Because you already knew the orc would come, and someone was supposed to be dead.” She met his smoldering eyes. “It was meant to be Brin, wasn’t it? The way you said he should have stopped the arrows … I thought you meant by stopping the orc.”

Lorcan’s eyes narrowed and he tried to grab her again. Farideh struck his arm aside and stepped back.

“Don’t touch me!”

“I was trying to protect you—”

“From what? From having another person to talk to? From having someone remind me you can’t be trusted?”

“From having him fill your ears with lies!” he said. “From having him convince you to strip away your pact because *he*’s afraid of it.”

“You’re just afraid you’ll lose your set,” she said. “I’m not going with you—not without Havi and the others.”

Her scar was screaming now, and without meaning to she clutched her arm with her opposite hand, as if she could stem the pain. Lorcan’s eyes were burning, the air between them boiling. He twisted his ring.

The portal swirled.

Farideh threw her hands up as he darted forward. Anger and instinct drove from her lips the triggering word for the blast. The crackling purple magic swelled in the few feet that separated them.

The spell had struck Lorcan full in the chest before she realized she'd cast it.

He stumbled backward and pressed a hand to his scorched armor, shocked. Farideh stared a moment, appalled, elated. Then her scar caught fire again. Lorcan spread his wings, and in his own hands, a spell of flames danced.

Run, she thought.

She bolted. Deeper into the city, scrambling over lava flows and ruins, Farideh didn't know where she was heading—only hoping, hoping that she would lose Lorcan in the twisting streets. But as she sprinted across a square she heard a heavy, gusting sound—he was flying, not running. The streets made almost no difference at all.

She turned a corner, skidded in the rubble that made the road, and crashed down on her hip, rucking her robes up to her waist as she slid. The leather leggings kept the gravel from embedding in her leg, but not her unprotected tail. And they did nothing for the bruises that screamed as she rolled back to her feet to start again, Lorcan's wingbeats growing closer still.

Farideh's throat ached, her lungs burned, and her heart pounded as if it were trying to pump a well dry, but still she ran.

She turned a corner, and there, as if an angel from above had deposited it especially for her, was a small temple, shining silvery in the moonlight. As brightly as it shone, the temple had to be new. Maybe with a priest. The doors were wide open and she made for them, pressing herself on with everything she had in her.

"Farideh, no!" She heard him land, but she didn't dare look back. If there was one place he couldn't chase her down, it would be the hallowed ground of a sanctified temple.

She sprinted up the steps, but as she made to cross the threshold, Lorcan caught hold of the back of her robes. She screamed and wrenched against his grip, the fabric tearing—as she fell into the temple.

Her fall pulled Lorcan's hand into the doorway, but as his knuckles reached the point where the temple began, they may as well have struck a solid wall. He let go of the fabric, furious and

panting. He threw himself shoulder-first against the empty doorway, and yet again, an invisible barrier threw him off.

Farideh scuttled backward into the temple, trying to catch her breath.

"Darling," Lorcan said, his voice sharp as a knife, "come out of there."

She shook her head. "Leave."

"Come out of there, right now!"

She held her hands up, ready to speak the words of the spell. "Get away from me, you bastard, or I'll do it again!" She would, she thought, tears streaming down her cheeks. She'd hit him with everything she knew. Burn him to ashes if he tried to drag her away again.

Lorcan snarled and punched the invisible barrier. He sprang into the air and a moment later she heard him pounding and cursing at the temple's other windows. They all held.

Limping, Farideh entered the sanctuary of the temple. Incense scented the air, and the silvery light of the risen moon lit the temple instead of torches. Rows of benches faced a platform where the icon stood. From the altar, a statue of a goddess framed by silver eyes and silver stars regarded Farideh benevolently: Selûne.

Farideh sat on one of the benches and covered her face with her hands. She didn't belong here. She was as good as stealing Selûne's protection while she snatched at the powers of the Hells. And while Lorcan howled and cursed at her for being so fickle.

Gods, she was such a little fool, trapped in an empty temple and crying when she knew exactly what she needed to do. She wondered if Yvon could help her find a safer devil than Sairché could. The thought undid her, and she sobbed into her hands.

The pain of her scar lessened as she sat, and the warm air and the scent of the incense made her eyelids heavy as her pulse slowed and her breath deepened. The temple was empty—surely no one would mind if she just lay down a moment.

Lorcan was scared, she reminded herself. Scared of Rohini? Scared of … what had he said? The cult of Asmodeus? Ashmadai?

She could still hear him pounding on the barriers of the skylights, and she curled her arms around her head to block the noise.

Scared or not, he was still dangerous. Mehen was still right.

She had to get out of the temple. She had to get back to Havilar and Mehen and Brin before anything bad happened, before Sairché caught Havilar, before Rohini—whoever she was—struck, before Lorcan did something worse. She shut her aching eyes, just for a moment.

Please, she thought to the statue on the altar, please just make him go away. Please just keep them safe until I can get rid of him. Please …

You need to leave, a voice said, clear as a bell in her thoughts.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the corner of Market Street and Clockmaker's Way, since long before the ruin of Neverwinter, a stone building full of narrow, private rooms had hidden the Cult of Glasya behind the facade of a brothel. In some decades it was plush and fine, in others rude and dirty, but in all times—even, quietly and secretly, when the rest of Neverwinter was empty—the altar in the basement to the copper-skinned princess of the Hells was varnished with fresh blood at regular intervals.

That day, the blood of its previous worshipers made the varnish.

Yvon surveyed the carnage. Twenty bodies—or rather the combined parts of twenty bodies—lay butchered on the floor. Sekata had stopped Lector from branding them all with the mark of Asmodeus.

"Eventually they will start to stink," she said, "and you don't want the Lord Pretender getting ideas. Let him think it was adventurers."

Lector had reluctantly agreed. He wiped his dagger on his robes, subdued. The Glasyans had managed to kill Imarella. Yvon felt a stab of pity for his old friend. If a lover had to die, better it was by one's own hand.

For the reaping, the cell had gathered another ten followers to them and crept up on the Glasyans. As an understanding of peace had been agreed to, the Glasyans had not expected the attack. Only three of the Ashmadai had fallen. They'd tortured the high priestess at length, searching for more information about the orc, but got little. Still the Sixth Layer cultists would think twice before stepping

out of line next time, Yvon thought. The Ashmadai ruled Neverwinter as their god ruled the Hells.

The Ashmadai stripped off their ceremonial robes so as not to arouse suspicion and stuffed them into several haversacks, before heading back up the stairs and out into the street in small groups. Above they would separate and take different paths back to their superior cell, where they could regale their betters with the tale of clearing out the Clockmaker's Way whores and sending a message to the Glasyans that their actions had been noticed.

Yvon went up last, alone, and so it was only he who spotted the line of orcs.

Traveling down the street, like ducklings trailing their mother, four orcs dripping the magic of the spellplague followed a half-elf wearing austere blue robes and the insignia of the hospital and Temple of Oghma.

To Yvon's trained eyes, the corruption of the Sixth Layer twisted over the man and the orcs like the curling threads of a mold beneath the molten light of the spellscars they all bore. The strange parade passed the temple-brothel by, oblivious to the abattoir their compatriots' hideaway had become.

"Well, well," Yvon murmured. "The plot thickens."

He trailed the strange parade through the narrow, shady streets, the spellscars electric in the fading light. They passed into the main thoroughfare only to cross the Dolphin Bridge, and thereafter veered down the riverside road, and into the yard of a forbidding old mansion.

Yvon's talent did not extend to structures, but even he could tell there was something peculiar about that odd and listing abode. He found a spot in a nearby doorway and watched.

Half an hour passed. Lamplighters made their way over the span of the bridge, turning back at the Blacklake side to leave the less secure district to the night. Yvon was ready to give up and hurry back to his shop—where no doubt, all his confederates had gathered—when the door of the strange house opened again, and the half-elf came out once more.

The orcs no longer followed him. Instead, the half-elf carried a wooden casket no wider than his shoulders. He stared down at it as he walked, as if transfixed by the bleached and cracked container. He did not notice Yvon, who stood and peered closely at him.

The Sixth Layer's signature was still there, faint and wispy and ready to dissolve. Overlaying it was something far stronger, far stranger. It was no mark of the Hells. The light of it was strange and made his eyes feel as if they were trying to boil. He looked away.

The mark wound around the half-elf's very bones. Whatever the Glasyans were toying with, it had no interest in being coy.



Sairché returned to Osseia and all but ran from the treasure room. Lorcan would be back soon, and he'd be furious. There was nothing to do but give him as wide a berth as possible until he calmed down enough to listen to reason.

She cursed a steady stream under her breath. What line had he sold that girl that she couldn't see the merit in coming with Sairché? She should have agreed. She should have seen *reason*.

Sairché slowed as she neared her mother's chambers. Perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps it was time to bring Lorcan into her plans. After all, her brother was obviously good at convincing mortals to take the pact. He'd have to see Sairché had a good plan in place—transfer the pacts to high-bidding devils and build up enough treasure or favors to keep them well into the millennia. Lorcan was in the exact same position that she was: outside the hierarchy, barely clinging to their mother's good graces, not enough influence to gain any real power. He'd have to acknowledge it was best to guard against—

Sairché froze.

The air had shifted as she turned the corner, and the sensation of being pulled into something vast and dark gripped her. She took a few cautious steps. The unmistakable scent of rotting flowers. She

peered down the corridor. There were hellwasps hovering on either side of the door to her mother's audience chambers.

Glasya herself called on Invadiah.

Sairché paused, watching the hellwasps dart back and forth. The sudden smell of her was agitating them, no doubt. Worse than that, they had their many, shining black eyes fixed on her as she watched them. Glasya's hellwasps could track down a body by its scent, but those gleaming eyes were how they pinpointed their prey, striking out with their bladed arms and poisoned stingers.

Mostly, though, the hellwasps hung in the air around Glasya, their adopted queen. The perfect position for gathering all manner of interesting secrets, Sairché thought. A pity hellwasps did not deal in anything but Glasya's pleasure.

"Identity," the nearer one said in a hard, dispassionate voice.

"Sairché, daughter of Exalted Invadiah," she said. "Is my mother in?"

"Impermissible," the hellwasp said. "You are a threat. Leave this area."

"I am not a threat," Sairché said, with a little laugh. "May I at least pass by? I need to—"

"All unknowns are threats. You will leave this area or you will be killed."

Sairché sighed and backed off twenty steps down the hallway. The difference was enough to satisfy the hellwasps, and they returned to their patrol around the entrance to Invadiah's chambers. What Sairché wouldn't give to be able to listen to what was happening in that room.

She bit her lip. From the pockets of her robes, she pulled a small crystal sphere and a vial of mixed powders. She didn't doubt Glasya had laid a powerful forbiddance upon the room, turning aside anyone who tried to spy on her. Sairché would have, had she been the archduchess. Hells, she would have if she were nothing but a talented mage.

But if Sairché didn't try to peer inside the room, she would never be *certain*. She sprinkled the powder over the crystal and touched it to her eyelids and her ears. She closed her eyes and pictured in her

mind's eye the brazier that burned in the corner. The scrying might create a disturbance in the air, but so did the fire, and it might not be noticed. She took a deep breath, waiting for the forbiddance to shut her out.

Instead, she felt the connection tighten, and when she opened her eyes, her mother's audience chamber was repeated in miniature within the crystal sphere.

"Twenty," Glasya said. "Twenty cultists dead." Her voice rang like the pealing of a bell. She sat upon an ornate litter, two more hellwasps hovering beside her.

Invadiah kneeled on the floor before the archduchess, her head bowed. "The Ashmadai are overbold, my lady. We would gladly alter our plans to see them punished."

"They may be overbold," Glasya said, "but something has spurred them to this. The imps watching over that cell tell me that the attackers claimed retaliation. And while I'm well aware my followers may have crossed paths with my lord father in the past, all has been quiet for months." She smiled, and even to see the pale reproduction, Sairché shuddered. "Tense, of course, but quiet. The only change has been in your task."

"I swear, my lady," Invadiah said, "we have made no such overtures."

Glasya ran one of the thongs of her scourge through the pinch of her fingernails. "I would suggest, Invadiah," she said, and a shiver went through the erinyes as the archduchess spoke her name, "that you make certain dear Rohini hasn't been keeping certain details from you. Otherwise"—she reached out with the butt of the scourge and forced Invadiah's head up with it—"we will have to discuss your failure to follow orders."

Instinctively, all four hellwasp guards surrounded her, took up the corners of the litter, and sped off through the doors of the balcony. The crystal turned cloudy again.

Sairché let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Better than she ever could have imagined! Asmodean cultists attacking Glasyan cultists, and her mother's Neverwinter mission caught in the middle while—

Sairché stopped herself and narrowed her eyes at the crystal. Plenty of sensitive, secret information. Why *hadn't* Glasya cast a forbiddance? Sairché might have a talent for ferreting out secrets, but she was a dabbler—there were plenty of more powerful mages among the devils of the Hells. Any of them could have been listening. Had Glasya wanted to be heard? Had she left the conversation open as a warning? But then why the hellwasps scaring everyone off? Sairché scowled at the crystal. Something didn't fit.

With the hellwasps gone, it was a simple matter to slip in through the door, tuck herself away in a corner, and become invisible. Invadiah stood facing the open balcony doors, her shoulders looking high and tense even through her armor.

In the corner, the fabric of the plane suddenly wrinkled and split, emitting a red-haired human woman with a sneer on her face. Sairché raised her eyebrows. She had wondered why Invadiah had been ignoring the Needle of the Crossroads, letting Lorcan come and go with it in the last few years—Glasya must have given her a proper portal for this Neverwinter business.

As the woman stepped out of the portal and toward Invadiah, the glamour melted off of her like wax: bat wings sprouted from her back, her frizzy red curls wafted around her head like a cloud of steam, and the drab robes she wore became a suit of tight-fitting black leather armor.

Rohini did not look happy.

"I can't leap back here every time you get tetchy!" she snarled. "I'm in the middle of things that cannot—"

"What do you know about dead Glasyan cultists?" Invadiah interrupted. Rohini caught her tongue and frowned.

"Nothing at all. Why? Should I?"

Invadiah's lip curled. "I thought you were the best? You haven't noticed the Ashmadai have decided to slaughter an entire cell of the archduchess's cultists in Neverwinter—an act they claim as retaliation?"

"Of course they claim so," Rohini said. "The Ashmadai have such fragile, petulant little egos. They'd kill a man for getting mud on

their doorstep."

"The imps reported the lead priestess was tortured at length for information about an orc who was serving them, and hunting warlocks."

Sairché raised her eyebrows at that. She had a very bad feeling.

Rohini rolled her eyes. "Well, what benefits Asmodeus—"

"This benefits us none at all!" Invadiah shouted. "Glasya is watching. Glasya knows we have slipped. How close are you? And I don't want to hear your nonsense about caution—we are too late for caution."

Rohini scowled at Invadiah. "He is with the ones who serve the Sovereignty as we speak. They should be impressed with the potential servitors, and they should give him further information regarding the aboleths which live in the Chasm. And then I will convince him to make the offer. And," she added with a snarl, "I would be a good deal further if I didn't have to keep your bastard son and his warlock out of my business."

Invadiah straightened. "What has Lorcan been doing?"

"Getting his fingers in Neverwinter," Rohini said, folding her arms over her chest. "Getting in my way. His warlock is a nuisance, but I deferred to your superiority, Lady Invadiah, and merely set her aside for the moment."

"I see." Invadiah stormed out the open doors and onto the balcony. "Nemea!" she bellowed. "Aornos! To me now!"

"What are you going to do?" Rohini said. "Have them rend me and rip me and make me say I'm lying? It won't change facts. In fact, I'd wager if anyone's responsible for the Ashmadai getting reckless, it's Lorcan."

Invadiah backhanded her, knocking Rohini off her feet, just as Nemea and Aornos, fully armored, galloped into the room.

Oh, this is going to solve everything, Sairché thought. She let the invisibility fall.

"Good afternoon, Mother," she said. Invadiah bared her teeth at her youngest daughter.

"How long have you been skulking in the corner, girl?"

“Long enough to hear that you might like some information about what Lorcan’s been up to.” Sairché fluttered her silvery lashes. “Just a few things you might like to know before you go ahead and kill the succubus.”

Invadiah didn’t reply, but she didn’t reach out to strangle her daughter either, so Sairché assumed she had the floor.

“To begin,” she said, “Lorcan does have a warlock in Neverwinter. I just saw her there. Though I highly doubt she has been much trouble for Rohini. She isn’t a particularly skilled caster.” Rohini glowered at her, still crumpled on the floor. “And then, did I hear you correctly? An orc is tangled up in this?”

Invadiah eyed her stonily and did not answer, but neither did she slap the teeth from Sairché’s mouth.

“I may have seen Lorcan—in fact, a great many *may* have seen him—the other day, borrowing the Axe of Exigency for an orc he had dragged to Malbolge as punishment for harming that warlock.”

“*My* Axe of Exigency?” Invadiah said.

“I couldn’t say. Though it does seem likely. It was meant to kill some priest or another for him.” Sairché tipped her head. “So you see, though Rohini speculates, she isn’t lying.”

Invadiah scowled and turned back to Rohini and the shimmering portal. “Where is Lorcan now?” she asked, and it wasn’t until her scowling eyes rolled back to Sairché that her daughter realized the question had been meant for her.

“On Toril,” she said quickly. “Last I saw. In Neverwinter.”

“And the warlock?”

“With him. Though,” Sairché added, “she didn’t seem happy to see him. They might have separated.”

Invadiah nodded, and Sairché could see they were all very lucky indeed that Invadiah didn’t slap the teeth from all of their mouths, and luckier still that they were none of them Lorcan.

“Aornos, Nemea,” Invadiah growled. “Fetch your brother.”

“Your wish, Mother,” Nemea said. “Whole or in parts?”

Invadiah’s scowl deepened. “Whatever you see fit.”

Nemea and Aornos grinned at one another, and Sairché schooled her expression to one of indifference. On some level, she certainly

pitied Lorcan, but if he was as clever as he seemed to think he was, he would figure out a way to escape Invadiah's wrath, and if he wasn't….

At least I am not so foolish, Sairché thought with a suppressed giggle.

"You can use the Needle to get in," Invadiah said. "The rings are in the treasury."

Sairché fingered the pilfered ring on her chain. "I'll fetch them for you," she offered, and she scurried out the door before Invadiah could tell her no.

But she hung back and pressed herself to the hard bone wall beside the door, listening as Invadiah said, "You can have the warlock. Consider her a gift for your good work. Do what you need to get things done."

"Oh," Rohini said, and the purr had returned to her voice, "I'll make *very* good use of her." There was a muted flash as the succubus reactivated the portal, and was gone, followed by a few choice insults from the erinyes.

Sairché pursed her lips and waited long enough to mimic a sprint to the treasury and back. Damn it, gods *damn* it. Rohini didn't even *know* the value of what she'd been handed, didn't even care. Sairché's plans were ruined.

No. The game's not over, she thought, slipping back into the room, holding the green stone ring.

"There was only one," she said apologetically. "I suspect Lorcan has the other."

Invadiah curled her lip and grabbed the ring roughly from Sairché. She stormed from the room and down the hall to the antechamber, her daughters trailing.

Ahead of the door, she stopped. Sairché ducked to peer around her half-sisters' knees. Hovering beside the door to the Needle of the Crossroads were two hellwasps, smaller than the ones that had been guarding Invadiah's chambers.

"Invadiah," one said. "We are to assist you."

"Assist me in what?"

“In correcting the error that resulted in the deaths of the queen’s worshipers.”

“I have my agents,” Invadiah replied.

“We are to accompany them,” the hellwasp replied. “The queen commands it, and so we must.”

“It is ill-advised to delay in this manner,” the other hellwasp said, its mandibles clicking in agitation. Or something, Sairché thought, wrinkling her nose. Who knew what the hellwasps felt. “We are ordered and we must follow orders.”

Invadiah grit her teeth a moment. “Very well. Move aside.”

The hellwasps parted, and Invadiah entered the room. As Lorcan had before, she activated the mirror. The surface shimmered and cleared to show Lorcan, skulking through the ruined streets of Neverwinter. Invadiah grabbed Aornos by the arm and hauled her in front of the mirror.

“There, that place. Study it. Fix it in your mind.” She stuffed the other erinyes’s finger into the green stone ring. When Aornos turned away from the mirror, and toward the Needle, it took several long moments of her concentrating to make the portal open.

“Grab hold of your sister’s hand,” Invadiah ordered. “The ring will allow you to carry her through. But no one else.” She turned to where the hellwasps hovered. “And *that* is where your orders cannot be followed,” she said. “There is no other trigger ring left in the Hells. If Aornos ferries you back and forth, she risks disrupting the portal and—worse—alerting Lorcan.”

“We are prepared,” one of the hellwasps said. “The queen has readied us.”

Its mandibles parted and from its soft, center mouth a third green stone ring protruded, thick with mucus.

Invadiah’s rage was a palpable thing, and Sairché stepped back, into the shadows.

“Very well,” she said tersely.

“We have memorized the spot,” the other hellwasp said. It hovered near to its compatriot and landed in the center of its back. “We will follow.”

Invadiah turned to Nemea. “Should you have trouble returning this way,” she said, through her teeth, “make use of Rohini’s portal?”

Nemea raised an eyebrow. “Aye, Mother.” She took hold of Aornos’s hand and with two bright flashes, the erinyes and the hellwasps passed out of the Hells and into Neverwinter.

Invadiah stood before the obelisk, her breath heaving, her teeth bared, for so long that Sairché was both too afraid and too curious to move. Invadiah snapped her gaze to her youngest daughter, and all the fury of the Hells boiled behind her eyes.

“Sairché!” she barked. “Hand me that hammer.”

From the piles of forgotten treasures, Sairché hauled an ancient terror hammer nearly as tall as she was and, trembling, dragged it to her monstrous mother.

Invadiah took hold of it as if it were nothing but a reed, testing its weight with a slow, wicked smile. With a great and terrible cry, she swung the hammer into the Needle of the Crossroads, shattering it with a great cloud of dust and a greater burst of crackling magic. Sairché threw up her hands to protect herself, and when she dared to look again, the ancient artifact was no more than a pile of mundane rubble over which Invadiah stood, panting and triumphant.

“You would do well to remember this moment, Sairché,” she said. “Before you go on dancing on the edges of my good graces.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Sairché walked the halls of Osseia, faintly dazed. The Kakistos heir was lost. Lorcan was doomed. Sairché was very much in her mother’s eye. Things were going to be very trying in the coming days. Perhaps she’d do well to find somewhere else to hole up. Beyond Osseia. Beyond Malbolge. Beyond the Hells even.

And then? she asked herself. She would always be under Invadiah’s thumb if she fled.

An imp popped into the space before her. “You Sairché?”

“What do you want?”

“Her ladyship would like you to know she was impressed with your resourcefulness. This is for you.” The imp handed her an

ornate envelope, made of heavy parchment and trimmed in layers of hammered copper. Twitching scarabs struggled in the corners, and a large tassel of … well, Sairché had never been particularly good at identifying skins, but if pressed she would guess it had been a halfling. A bloodred wax seal bore the sigil of Glasya—a scourge with six thongs. She unfolded it and skimmed the contents.

"A conditional summons?" she asked.

"Indeed," said the imp with a serrated grin. "T'will burst into flames when she's ready to see you. I suggest you be in court before the smoke clears."



Lorcan slammed his fist against the barrier of the shrine's door once more. Every entry point to the temple blocked him as firmly as a brick wall. Even the skylight cut into the roof threw him back when he alighted on it. And Farideh either couldn't hear him shouting at her, or she was still angry and ignoring him.

The options left to him were unpleasant. He couldn't solve this himself. He needed to get someone to pull her out of there. He eyed the door once more and cursed.

Lorcan kept to the shadows as he slinked down the roads, keeping an eye out for the massive temple he'd seen in the mirror. If Rohini could put up with working there, surely the spells that barred fiends had worn down enough to slip in and grab Farideh's sister. He just had to find the temple. And not be seen.

He ducked into an alley as he heard footsteps approaching. A group of humans in rags strolled by, taking far longer than Lorcan wanted to wait. He looked at his hands—there *was* a way he could move more quickly … But Lorcan hated that spell. Something about it made his skin feel like it was peeling off.

It's fine, he thought. You won't die of waiting. These fools will pass, you will find the temple, Havilar will be worried enough to help, and you will get Farideh out of that blasted chapel.

And then what? Lorcan hated to admit it but he wasn't sure. The way she'd looked at him—Hells, the fact that she'd run as if he were

a hungry demon … she had never been that angry at him, that afraid of what he would do, that determined to stop him. If he succeeded and pulled her out of Neverwinter, out of harm's way, she would almost certainly break the pact. She would have never forgiven him if he'd left Havilar behind—he realized that now.

He wondered if Havilar would make him this mad.

He slipped out into the empty street again. Perhaps he ought to have told Farideh everything: the orc, the Ashmadai, Rohini's naked threats. She wasn't an idiot. She had to see the danger. If he sat her down and reasoned with her, surely she'd see he was only doing what was best for them both and *listen* to him—

The air suddenly sizzled with magic. Lorcan spun around, reaching for his sword, when the fabric of the planes split, and a path to the Hells appeared.

Nemea and Aornos stepped through the portal, undisguised and heavily armed. Surging out from behind them came a pair of Glasya's hellwasps.

"Well, well, baby brother," Nemea said. "Looks as if you've finally gotten Mother's notice."

"There's been a mistake," he said, holding his arms up in a gesture of surrender.

"Has there?" Nemea drawled. "We'll have to sort that out another time."

"Exonerate you after death," Aornos added.

"Or not," Nemea said. "Whatever you've done, Invadiah is furious. She says we don't need to be careful. She says Rohini can have your little warlock."

Shit and fire, Lorcan thought. What did Invadiah think he'd done? The orc? Not hellwasps for a bloody orc whose soul Asmodeus couldn't claim as fast as he wanted.

"And then we can help Rohini finish things." Aornos grinned, her pointed white teeth as sharp and hungry as any predator's. "In proper fashion."

"So thank you, little brother," Nemea said. "If you hadn't gotten all those cultists killed, we would still be on guard duty."

“Cultists?” Lorcan said. He twisted the ring. Nothing. “I haven’t killed any cultists.”

Nemea clucked her tongue. “Seems you might have done something foolish.”

Aornos drew her sword. “Something that gave some Ashmadai the idea they ought to be killing Glasyans. Hmm?”

Lorcan turned the ring again, and still he was standing on Toril, his half-sisters advancing on him with naked blades, and a pair of hellwasps circling them. He let loose a stream of curses, spinning the ring over and over. Nothing.

“Perhaps,” Aornos said, waving her blade, “Asmodeus will resurrect you. Then we can hear the full story.”

“Or perhaps not,” Nemea said drawing her own blade.

“*Adaestuo!*” Lorcan shouted. The sizzling blast struck Aornos, and gave him time to pull his own sword. But in that breath between the casting and drawing his sword, the hellwasps struck.

He was fortunate—not every devil’s blood burned hot enough to temper the poison of a hellwasp, but, even tempered, the pain was excruciating, so bad his arms and legs refused it and went briefly numb. He flung his sword outward, missing the darting hellwasp but forcing Nemea to step back.

He could not defend against all of them. Aornos slipped into the breach and slashed across his back, while the second hellwasp closed and drove its saberlike arms into his shoulders. Nemea sprang forward again, this time aiming at the joint of his left wing. Lorcan twisted, and her blade struck the hellwasp instead.

The creature screeched as Nemea’s sword smashed through its carapace as if it were no more than an eggshell. The hellwasp’s sharp forelegs slid from Lorcan’s wounds and the devil vanished in a gust of flame.

Lorcan stood no chance against Nemea and Aornos, let alone against a hellwasp. He loosed another dart of fire at Aornos as she broke forward, but it only gave Nemea another chance to crash her sword against his armor, the hellwasp a chance to sting him again.

The poison flooded his veins once more and Lorcan’s knees buckled. He threw his sword up to block Nemea’s, and Aornos’s

sword forced past his leather armor and into the muscles of his back.

This was how he'd always suspected he'd die.

Shit and ashes—if he died now, not only would Farideh be dead for certain, but she'd be right. He'd be a useless bastard.

Blood weeping from his many wounds, Lorcan drew on everything he had. The powers of Malbolge poured into him and burst out in a ring of flames that burned his sisters and threw the hellwasp back. The magical explosion propelled him into the air, his wings catching the hot air and launching him forward.

He flew, one hand pressed against the deeper wound to his shoulder, one wing rapidly stiffening from the poison. Nemea and Aornos might not be able to pursue, but the hellwasp would be winging after him—and without Aornos or Nemea, he couldn't count on an accidental ally. He had to slow the hellwasp down.

He headed toward the Chasm.

Along the wall he spied a stretch where no soldiers patrolled—just beyond a jut of broken bricks. He pulled the straps of his armor tighter, making sure what was left of the leather pressed against his wounds to staunch the blood. Landing unevenly, he glanced back. The hellwasp was closing.

Lorcan had no time to cast the spell gently.

Every inch of his skin felt as if it were full of nettles and sparks. He bit down on his lip to keep from screaming and broke through, filling his mouth with scalding hot blood.

He held his hands out in front of him as the pain ebbed, starting at the core of his body and spreading to his limbs. At the edge of the agony, his skin faded from red to tan, his nails turned pink. His wings collapsed into nothing, rocking him off-balance as he lost their weight. He ran his fingers through his hair, noting the missing horns. It had worked, hopefully enough to fool the hellwasp that was diving straight toward him.

The hellwasp halted, hovering in the air ahead of Lorcan. Darting back and forth, peering at him with each of its multifaceted eyes. It might have scented Lorcan, or something like him. But with the Chasm so close, whatever magical trace it might have tasted was

obscured. And there, before it, was a man who looked nothing like a cambion. Agitated, its darting paths took it wider and wider as it tried to discern where its prey had gone.

Lorcan drew his sword, quickly—the hellwasp heard and focused on him, but its moment of disorientation had served its purpose.

With a great cry, Lorcan swung the sword into the narrowest part of the hellwasp's abdomen, shearing through the carapace. Like its sibling, the hellwasp screeched and burst into flames, to be reborn—like its sibling—in the Hells.

Lorcan collapsed bleeding onto the brick wall.

Ashmadai killing other cultists … Rohini and his mother's plans in Neverwinter in jeopardy … that bloody orc could only be blamed for a portion of this catastrophe. For while Goruc's murder by the Ashmadai hands might have incited them to kill Glasyans, only Sairché would have the wits to tie it to Lorcan.

He pulled himself up and limped to the nearby tower, a cracked and damaged thing still being built. He had to get Farideh out of Neverwinter. He had to get himself back to the Hells. And now in addition to Ashmadai, mad Rohini, and bloody Sairché, he had Nemea and Aornos to worry about.

Lorcan hobbled down the stairs, taking little solace in the suspicion that in this case, Havilar would be exactly as much trouble as her sister.

Brin left a trail of chalky white footprints across the flagstones of the entry hall. He paused, weary, and regarded the mess. The thought that he should do something about it slipped in and out of his thoughts again. He rubbed the back of his neck with a blistered hand and glanced around the empty corridors.

Brother Vartan had talked at him for what felt like ages before Rohini had come and insisted the priest come with her and that Brin get to clearing the courtyard …

Which he'd done, for ages more, until it occurred to him he hadn't eaten or rested since Rohini left, and he didn't recall how the

grounds had been cleared of so much rubble, or when he'd emptied the barrow that must have carried it out to the rubble pile beside the Chasm wall. It was as if he'd been entranced.

He stared at the footprints again, still feeling muzzy and hating the feeling of stonedust on his skin. Change of clothes. But first, put his feet up. No, first get some food.

The cooks tried to make him sit down and eat something, but Brin only took a bit of bread and cheese and a jug of cider as he shuffled back toward his room. He was too tired for company, even just the cooks talking over him.

In the wardrooms, the spellscarred flickered as they slept, and some, no longer burdened by the eager watch of acolytes, sat up in their cots and chatted or played cards. Brin watched a moment, recognizing the camaraderie of soldiers. Memories twitched behind the familiarity, but when they didn't rise up, he just shook his head. He was tired, after all. He'd been … somewhere doing … something. He cursed and finished the bread and cheese, and drank a little more cider.

Which room was his? He turned into a likely one, the light of a distant streetlamp the only illumination.

His foot banged into something and he stumbled to the flagstones, the jug of cider shattering under him. He cursed and reached for whatever it was he'd tripped on—

His hand closed on the haft of Havilar's glaive.

Havilar …

She'd been in the courtyard. She'd left when Brother Vartan came —no, he'd covered for her so she didn't have to stay. But she was supposed to come back, he thought irritably. She was supposed to come get you for supper.

And she didn't, he thought. He picked up the heavy polearm. Loyal Fury, she had to be strong….

She didn't come back—the thought was growing more insistent, pressing on the fog of his brain. She hadn't come back and her glaive—the weapon she loved like a child—was lying on the floor….

He looked around the room, his eyes adjusting. This was the twins' room. He was sleeping two doors down. A jumble of cloaks and clothing was piled on the beds, but several things were conspicuous in their absence: Farideh's sword and both twins' armor.

Havilar's armor's gone, he thought. She'll be angry she left her glaive. She'll be *furious* you kicked it….

She hadn't come back, but she'd taken her armor and left her glaive on the floor like something discarded. She hadn't come back because she'd left….

Brin grabbed the haft of the weapon in both hands as the haze over his thoughts finally cleared like a cloud break, so sudden he gasped in surprise. Something was *wrong*.

Still clutching the glaive, he ducked back out into the hallway. It didn't make sense. They shouldn't have taken armor and left the weapon. Why would Farideh have taken her sword and Havi left her glaive?

The corridors were still empty. He hurried back to the open wardroom. Three of the soldiers were up and talking still—a thin human man with a bandage over his eye, a tiefling with his leg in a splint, and a rather petite half-orc woman with one arm in a sling and the shimmer of a spellscar encasing the other.

"Have any of you seen a tiefling girl?" Brin asked.

The human nodded at the glaive. "The one running around with that thing? Aye, she was terrorizing the acolytes this afternoon." The tiefling chuckled.

"They told her to get lost in the unrepaired wing," the half orc said. "And she offered to beat some sense into them. Or something."

"Haven't heard a string of Draconic that blue since I was in Tymanther," the tiefling noted. "You here to put us to bed?"

Brin shook his head. "I'm not an acolyte." He hurried back toward the rooms. Surely, surely, the twins had to be somewhere near. He lit a candle off one of the torches and returned to their room. The light fell on their haversacks and cloaks, still piled by one wall. They couldn't have gone too far.

Unless they didn't go willingly, he thought. Lorcan, the orc … and something worse than Netherese. *When a city gets as old as Neverwinter, old powers entrench themselves in all the gaps and crannies.* He hurried to his room, to gather his own swordbelt and his holy symbol.

Old anxieties twined their way up through Brin's thoughts. Holy champion or not, he knew what he had to do. But gods, if things were as bad as he feared, there was no room to fail. He pushed open the doors of the remaining rooms. In the third one, he found Mehen, sitting alone in a chair missing an armrest, watching a flickering lantern sitting on the floor. He looked up at Brin.

"Thank the gods. Well met," he said. The dragonborn kept staring at him. "Do you know what happened to Havilar and Farideh?"

"No," Mehen said coldly. Brin took a step back.

"They're not in their room. And Havilar's glaive was just lying on the floor."

Mehen didn't answer, he just kept staring at Brin in that unnerving way.

"You don't seem concerned," Brin said. Again, no answer, and again, Brin felt an uncertain anxiety, like he was being stared down by a stern Tormtar, unhappy with his arguments about the nature of duty.

He backed out of the room. If Mehen wasn't worried, perhaps Brin shouldn't be either … but there was still the glaive that shouldn't have been there, and the missing armor. Something was definitely wrong.

Brin turned and nearly ran smack into Brother Vartan. The priest didn't move, but stared down at Brin over a box made of bleached driftwood planks.

"Sorry," Brin said. "I didn't see you. I'm looking for—"

"We are all looking," Brother Vartan said. He pressed toward Brin, his eyes shining with a strange film that made them seem paler somehow. "But will we ever find? Not without new eyes. There is so much you cannot imagine. So much you cannot see." He giggled, in a strained way. "Your mind is too ephemeral to hear the song."

Brin swung the glaive between them. “Are you all right, Brother?”

“I brought a gift.” The half-elf giggled. “It’s not for you, not yet. They said to give it to her, and only her. They think perhaps she’ll suit better than Anthus ever did. And if she doesn’t?” He giggled again. “Tomorrow’s always another day!”

Vartan pounced toward Brin, and broke into maniacal laughter when the younger man blocked with the heavy glaive. Vartan turned away with the strange casket, and wandered his way up the corridor.

Brin watched him go, the glaive still held before him like a barrier. What, by every watching god, was happening in the House of Knowledge?



You need to leave.

Farideh sat up, startled, and glanced around. Night had fallen and the temple was dark but for the fall of moonlight that struck the statue of Selûne. She was alone still, the temple quiet as a tomb. She stretched against stiff muscles. How on earth had she managed to fall asleep? She eyed the statue.

You need to leave.

Farideh startled. It was her own voice in her own thoughts, but it came so suddenly, so insistently. Not an order. Not a threat. A certainty. She needed to be somewhere else. Soon. Now …

The statue looked down at her with a beatific smile.

Farideh’s stomach tightened. She stood and backed away from the altar. She did need to leave. She’d known that. It wasn’t the statue telling her what to do. It couldn’t be. But the hazy memories of the hours before drifted back … the strange calm that had overtaken her with the scent of incense …

Please just make him go away. Please tell me what to do.

You need to leave.

The statue shone in the moonlight, still and quiet. A cloud passed overhead, shadowing the statue, but somehow it seemed to gleam

just as brightly. Farideh backed away.

"Thank you," she said as she reached the door, uncertain of the form, "for the … protection."

Outside the shrine, all was quiet. Lorcan had left for the moment. She peered up at the broken rooftops around her. He might be anywhere.

"Stay calm," she whispered to herself, as if hearing her own voice would ground her. The shadows reached out for her, and in turn, out of her more shadows crept, swaddling her like a blanket. She crept across the square and edged her way down the road.

Neverwinter loomed all around Farideh, a toothy monster all shadows and voids. With every step she put between herself and the chapel, her unease grew, and whatever had cooled and calmed her pulse, began to wear away. Her hip still ached where she'd fallen on it, and the rough fabric of the hospital's robes rasped her scraped tail.

Somewhere, in the dark and broken city, Lorcan was looking for her. Somewhere Rohini might be more dangerous than she'd thought. Somewhere there were Ashmadai. Somewhere Sairché might be watching.

Farideh reached the bridge and scanned the sky. No dark shapes circling the river. No devils, all fire and talons or silver tongues and hungry hands, ready to pluck her up. She hurried across the river.

Lorcan had laid bare the full extent of her foolishness: he was a monster, he had always been a monster, and she was the only one who'd gone along hoping, wishing, pretending it wasn't so. Such a lamb-brained little idiot, she thought. Only *you* would be surprised he'd sent an assassin after your family.

How Mehen would crow if he knew.

She passed near the House of Knowledge and thought of what Lorcan had said about Rohini. *The biggest viper of them all.* Because she was dangerous to Lorcan or dangerous to Farideh? She glanced up again at the sky, at the gathering clouds. A distant roll of thunder rumbled somewhere over the sea.

Lorcan first, she thought. Whatever threat Rohini was, she could wait until Farideh was sure Lorcan wasn't going to kill anyone.

For Lorcan … she would go to Yvon.

She hurried down the road, glancing up at the darkening sky for the shape of Lorcan diving at her. Yvon had said his warlock friends would be gathering tonight. She'd be safer with them around. And after all, Yvon had managed to protect her from the orc and—

A great clash of thunder startled her, and moments later, the rain started pouring down. Farideh pushed aside her thoughts and sprinted the rest of the way to Yvon's shop.

The door was locked, but when she tapped, the assistant—Kalam—peered out the window and unlocked it for her. He gave her a stiff nod. "They're downstairs."

"Thank you," she said, trying to shake the rain from her borrowed robes. "Do you have any bandages?"

He shook his head. "You'll have to ask Master Claven. I'm only on door duty."

She thanked him again, and passed through the curtain and down into the room Yvon had led her through before. Cold-burning torches lit the room now, and Farideh could see it *was* much larger than the shop above. A dozen people sat in a rough circle near the center of the room listening to Yvon talking. He paused, looked up at her, and beckoned her down.

"This is the young woman I was telling you about," he said, as she slid in behind a blonde elf woman. "It's she who our late, ahem, 'friend' was sent after. Farideh, I shall have to introduce you around later, as we're in the middle of discussing—"

"I don't see what there is to discuss," a big tiefling man interrupted. "We've dealt with the Glasyans."

"This isn't merely about Glasyans," Yvon said, sounding annoyed. "So let me finish, Creed. The orcs *were* marked by Sixth Layer magic, but as before, only faintly."

"And spellscarred," the tiefling beside Creed said. "You've said that."

"So the Glasyans are trying to use the spellplague," the elf woman said with a shrug. "They wouldn't be the first."

"That would be the simple answer," Yvon said, "but I suspect it would be the incorrect one. I followed them, you see. The house he

brought the orcs to was most interesting. The edge of the Blacklake —"

"Yvon, get to the bloody point!" the elf said.

"The orcs didn't come out. Not with our priest."

"So?"

"So, the priest came out, one cask and one mark richer. The second mark overwhelms the first, in most unexpected ways."

The tiefling man frowned. "Another archduke?"

"No. It was …" Yvon shuddered. "Something else. Let us simply say I did not wish to test it any further than I did. Either the Glasyans are arming some other force, or they are comrades to it. Or they are slaves of it. And more," he added, "I did some asking. The man is no mere priest. He heads the hospital they run in the House of Knowledge."

"Brother Vartan?" Farideh asked.

Suddenly a dozen pairs of eyes were on her. On the hospital robes she was wearing. She flushed deeply. Yvon gave her a quizzical look. "Do you know the good brother then?"

"I … I've met him."

"Really?" Yvon asked. He stepped closer to her, eyeing her robes. "And how did that happen?"

She opened her mouth but the words didn't come. Her gaze swept the gathered group, but every one of them was watching her as if she were a rat come in through the floorboards.

And then she saw between the two tiefling men, beyond them, a wide table with strange markings all over it stood in front of a hanging—

Farideh closed her mouth, her heart in her throat.

The hanging banner showed three black triangles surrounded by a larger triangle and a nine-sided circle.

You see that symbol, you run.

"I think," Yvon said. "There's quite a lot you have to tell us still."

Oh gods, she thought. *You must know how to turn back time to keep that orc from being sacrificed to the king of the Hells.*

She had only the merest moment to feel like a fool, to chastise herself for the mistake that was about to cost her her life. Yvon's

friends were the Ashmadai Lorcan had been warning her about, and she had come to them like a supplicant.

No, she thought, noticing the many eyes on her. Like a sacrifice.

Yvon's expression had gone cold. He's pieced it together too, Farideh thought. "Your robes are from the hospital," he noted. "Might I wager your Lorcan is a cambion who wears the copper scourge?"

Farideh's tongue was not made to lie. She knew her terror was plain on her face. She couldn't pretend that Lorcan had set her up for this. She couldn't pretend she dressed in the robes because she was trying to undo things like a wicked cultist would. She couldn't pretend she had any way out of the basement room.

The shadow-smoke curled out of her, and the powers rushed in. She took a step backward and felt several similar surges throughout the room—other warlocks calling on their patrons' powers.

"It isn't what it seems," she said.

"Don't be foolish," Yvon warned. "You alone are no match for us."

A sharp cry sliced through the door at the top of the stairs. Yvon's gaze darted up to it, then back to Farideh. "What have you—"

The door slammed open with a crack. Thirteen pairs of eyes watched as Havilar, dressed in her armor and carrying Farideh's rod and sword, descended into the Ashmadai's ritual chamber.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Havi!" Farideh cried. "Get away!"

Havilar didn't look at her sister. Her golden eyes were locked on Yvon instead, burning hot and hateful. The shopkeeper for his part seemed to scour Havilar with his gaze, as if searching for the secret at the core of her. She pointed the rod at his head. "Sixth Layer," he hissed.

Havilar stood perfectly still, rod outstretched. For the merest of moments, no one moved and all eyes were on the quartz tip of the rod. But nothing happened.

Then the smaller tiefling man, the warlock, cast a blast of heat that washed over Havilar as harmless as a gale. She flinched away and he leaped closer, his hand outstretched with some foul spell on his fingertips, ready to end things.

Havilar struck him across the frailest part of his cheekbone with the heavy quartz tip. The strike was perfect. His face erupted in a spray of blood and snapped something deeper in his skull—a dull wheeze accompanied the crunch of bone, and he collapsed, his eyes glazing. Havilar flipped Farideh's sword into a stabbing grip and shoved it halfway through the elf woman's chest and back out without so much as looking. The woman gasped and collapsed onto Farideh.

The Ashmadai erupted.

Yvon may have been right—Farideh alone stood little chance against the assembled cultists. Inevitably, Havilar would fall as well. But Havilar would take a great many of them with her, regardless of the madness that seemed to grip her.

And Farideh would keep her from falling.

She cast a stream of flames into the crowd, neatly parting it and keeping Havilar from being overrun. Her sister seemed, again, to try and cast through the rod, again, frustrated when nothing came of it. She dodged one of the Ashmadai warlocks, tripping him into a comrade so his spell discharged in a messy burst of burning smoke that left the Ashmadai screaming in pain.

Farideh cast a similar cloud of miasma around her, catching the four cultists advancing toward her. She stepped through a rent in the planes and reappeared on the other side of the room, where she could more easily—

A sharp pain exploded from the side of her skull, and her head rocked sideways as something caught her horn and wrenched her neck. She fell to her knees, her vision crumbling into stars. Instinct urged her to move, and she rolled onto her back in time to dodge the big tiefling's bludgeon smashing into the floor beside her. She threw up her arms and he grinned wickedly, pulling back for another strike.

"*Adaestuo.*" The blast streaked past the tiefling and crashed into the ceiling above him, punching a hole through to the shop above. Chunks of plaster and floorboard hailed down on them both, but the heavy joist swung down into the man's head, knocking him senseless for a moment. Farideh cast another blast at him, throwing him backward into the fray. He slammed into Havilar, who caught his weight and threw him to the ground before pinning him down with Farideh's sword.

Yvon lunged at Havilar. Farideh's blast caught him and he stumbled, enough to give Havilar time to pull the sword free and turn her attention to the shopkeeper. She slammed her palm against his breastbone, arresting him, and gave him a wicked grin. The flash of magic that pulsed over Yvon's body shimmered like a slick of lamp oil. His face contorted in pain, his eyes rolled back, and he fell to his knees. The pulse came again and he collapsed.

Havilar looked up at Farideh and sneered. She pulled the sword free of the tiefling man's body. There were only three Ashmadai still standing, and those had sense enough to stay back.

“Havi, come on,” Farideh said, one hand pressed to the lump growing on the back of her head. The bludgeon had half caught on her horn, but it had hit her hard enough to make her head spin as she lurched toward her sister.

Havilar regarded her, cruel and amused, as if she were watching a spider whose legs she’d plucked one by one try to cross the floor. She turned her attention, unhurried, to the remaining Ashmadai—all armed with daggers. She dropped the sword and the rod and gestured with her hands at the nearest one, the one wounded by Farideh’s miasma. His eyes seemed to glaze over and he turned from Havilar to the cultist beside him, a tiefling woman with wild, white curls. Without a word, he plunged his dagger to the hilt in her back.

Farideh froze, watching as Havilar directed the cultist to go after his final fellow. The last man bolted for the stairs, but as he did, he passed Havilar, and again she caught him with that strange pulse of oily magic, and he collapsed. The other Ashamadai was on him in an instant.

Farideh bent and picked up the rod, uncertain of what was happening, of how much she was imagining. She pressed a hand to her skull again and the hand came away sticky with blood.

“Havi,” she said, her voice shaking, “stop.”

Havilar didn’t respond and kicked the final Ashmadai under the chin so that his head snapped back hard. Dazed, he hardly fought as she stabbed his comrade’s dagger into the fleshy part of his throat. Dark blood gushed out and he collapsed.

Havilar scooped the sword off the ground and turned to face her sister. Her face was a mess of cuts and swollen lumps, but Havilar didn’t seem to notice at all. She advanced on Farideh.

“What …” Farideh tried to ask. Her head had started spinning again. “What have you *done*? Why did you—” She turned aside as Havilar lunged forward with the sword, barely missing the blade. “Havi!”

“You’ll have to kill her,” Havilar said, her voice raspy and her grin maniac. “I won’t let her go.”

“What are you talking about?” Farideh shouted. She ducked under another sword strike. “Havi, it’s me!”

“It *should* have been you, warlock,” Havilar said, pressing her past the altar. “But no mind. Only you will know my mistake, and you were always meant to die.”

“*Assulam*!” The altar burst into pieces, making Havilar step back and giving Farideh room to retreat. But the shards of stone had no more clattered to the ground but Havilar was advancing on her again.

Suddenly it felt as if a net had been cast over her, and she found herself dragged toward Havilar and the sword. Her hand convulsed around the rod, and trying to move her own arm became a battle fierce as the one they’d just finished. It wasn’t Havilar casting spells, but it was Havilar’s body standing in front of her.

“Who are you?” Farideh whispered, her jaw stiff against the spell.

“Your sister,” the creature in her twin’s skin replied. “For now.” She placed the tip of the sword against Farideh’s breastbone and tilted her head. “I wonder what she’ll do when she realizes that she’s the one who killed you. Will it break her, or will she be glad she finally managed it?”

The force holding Farideh’s body stiff snapped audibly as she wrenched her arm upward. Havilar’s eyes widened, and Farideh felt the being try to close the force back over her again. But Farideh was already shouting the trigger word that vanished in the roar of a wall of flame.

The fire only singed Havilar’s hair and the edges of her armor, but the force of the spell threw her backward. She crashed against the wall, her head snapping back like a discarded doll, and crumpled at its base.

Farideh started toward her sister’s body, but her legs buckled. The strange magic still clung to her. She wrenched herself up and half-stumbled, half-crawled across the mess of bodies and blood and rubble. Havilar lay slack and senseless on the floor, her breath ragged and her pulse thready. She didn’t stir when Farideh tapped her cheek.

Farideh cursed. She hurried up the stairs. Kalam lay sprawled across the shop floor, cut from throat to belly and leaking blood and gore onto the polished floors. Farideh's knees buckled before she was messily sick beside him. Her head was still pounding and when she wiped her face, her hand was streaked with blood that dripped from her nose.

Panting, she reached for the healing potions and gathered up an armful before stumbling back downstairs. She fed one to Havilar and watched as her wounds closed and her bruises faded. But she didn't wake. A ruby drop of syrup pooled in the corner of Havilar's mouth and ran down her cheek like a stream of blood. Farideh cracked another. And a third, but Havilar didn't wake. She cursed.

Her hands cold and shaking, she opened the last of them and drank it herself. It tasted like bile and chalk, but it made the pain in her head fade and the shock that kept threatening to overtake her body retreat into a simpler, more focused panic.

There was nothing to be done for the Ashmadai, and if she didn't hurry, there would be nothing to be done for Havilar either. Farideh could almost hear Mehen bellowing not to move Havilar, especially not when her neck had slammed against the wall like that, to try and wake her before she slipped away.

But whatever was wrong with Havilar, whatever had come over her, no Ashmadai was going to forgive her because she might have been concussed. Farideh shoved the rod into her belt, and the sword as well, maneuvered her arms around her sister's middle, and hauled her up the back stairs into the little garden. The rain was still coming down in a heavy patter. She laid Havilar on the muddy ground while she unlatched the little shed and led the donkey out.

Havilar needed a priest, and quickly. Farideh couldn't trust the House of Knowledge, not when Lorcan was probably still looking for her, when the Ashmadai were suspicious of the place, when Rohini was still some sort of threat. She'd take Havilar to the little shrine to Selûne, then go back and find Brin. Or maybe whoever guarded the shrine would be there this time. Either way, it was the safest place she could think of. With quite a bit of struggle, she got

both herself and Havilar onto the donkey, and got the donkey moving toward the Blacklake District.

The shrine still waited, silvery even under the clouds. Farideh dragged Havilar up the shallow stairs of the entry, easing her over the steps and trying to ignore the fact that the potion hadn't been enough to heal her hip or completely remove her headache.

"Whoever you are," Farideh said as she reached the doorway, "I hope this hurts."

She yanked hard, dragging Havilar across the threshold of the temple. Whatever magic protected the entries resisted ever so slightly, but as Havilar's body broke the plane of the doorway, the magic burst into a shower of sparks. Gods, Farideh thought as she laid her sister gently on the stone floor, what did *that* mean?

A noise from the rear of the sanctuary made her jerk her head up. She stood and crept down the aisle of the benches.

"Lycanthropes are the *least* of your worries. Shar's children are here."

"Netherese?"

Farideh followed the sounds of the voices to the room off to the left of the altar. "Aye, and more. Devil-worshipers, a spellplague pocket, and something I can't pinpoint that's throwing off an awful lot of necromantic energy. Orcs in every bloody ruin—and not the civilized kind. There's a building near the castle that's oozing Far Realm contaminate." There was a man in there with dark hair speaking into some sort of amulet that scintillated with silver light. He paced as he spoke, but kept his face away from Farideh. The priest? she wondered. The voice sounded familiar. "And a bloody volcano on top of everything. Fisher, cut your losses and clear out. This city is going to fall."

"We pull out, the Netherese gain another stronghold," the voice from the amulet said.

"You *don't* pull out and you're going to lose the agents you have here," the man retorted. "You aren't equipped to bring down this many threats."

"We'll send more agents."

“And you’ll lose more agents you can’t spare.” The man stopped and ran a hand through his hair, and Farideh nearly cried out in joy: the priest was Tam.

“I’m telling you,” he said, “this isn’t something you can handle. Short of convincing the gods to bless a handful of Chosen, or maybe just come on down themselves, there is nothing the Harpers can do for Neverwinter.”

“We have to try.”

“Something’s wrong with Havilar,” she said.

Tam let loose a string of curses—then he spotted Farideh. “Fisher, I have company.” He looked her over as he tucked the amulet away. “You don’t look so well yourself,” Tam said, following her into the sanctuary. “What happened?”

What happened, she thought, is I have done everything wrong. If I hadn’t made the pact, I would still be safe in Arush Vayem. Lorcan would never have sent the orc after Brin. The Ashmadai would never have killed the orc and traced it to Lorcan. He never would have chased Farideh into the shrine and she never would have fled back to the Ashmadai, who Havilar wouldn’t have killed because they would still be safe in the Smoking Mountains. A flaw, she thought.

She merely shook her head, fighting tears. “Too many things.”

Tam kneeled beside her and coaxed an abbreviated version of the fight from Farideh, the details of how Havilar acted, how she’d knocked her cold and finally, why she’d brought her back to this shrine, where the spells on the door had crackled and sparked.

“Well,” he said after a long moment, “she’s clearly been tampered with by a fiend. Is she a warlock too?”

“No,” Farideh said tightly. “What do you mean tampered with?”

“She’s fighting off the remains of some sort of spell. Possession maybe. A domination, perhaps. We’d have to ask her when she wakes up.”

“But she *will* wake up?”

“Likely,” Tam said. “She’s not out because she’s concussed, if that’s what you fear. Let her rest in the temple. The blessings should

unwork what's left." He regarded Farideh stonily. "I take it your … friend is involved."

"No friend of mine did this."

"Farideh," he said gently. "Let's not pretend to be fools. I know what you are. And I can guess you're acquainted with the cambion who accosted me in Neverwinter Wood?"

She flushed to her temples. "Did he?" she said quietly.

"He backed off rather quickly. Do you think he might have done this?"

Could he? Certainly. If Lorcan had proved anything in the last few hours it was that he was capable of all sorts of horrible things. Would he?… She was less certain about that. It hadn't been Lorcan in Havilar's skin. Farideh knew the sound of his voice too well, the way he moved.

That doesn't mean he couldn't have sent someone else, she thought.

"I don't know," she said.

Tam watched her, sadly, and she squirmed under his gaze. "I would suggest," he said, "you think long and hard about whom you are protecting."

"I'm not protecting him!" she said. "I said I don't know because I don't. Do you think I would really *protect* someone I thought had nearly killed my sister?" She faltered. He had. This would make twice, and if he had done something to Havilar she would make certain he regretted it. But it was Lorcan or Sairché or *nothing*.

"I don't want to protect him." Tam gave her a skeptical look, and she scowled. "It's complicated … more complicated than anyone seems to realize. He's cruel and he's persuasive and he has only his own interests at heart. But sometimes, I think he might be the only friend I have in the world except for Havilar."

"You could be rid of him, you know?" Tam said. "I could help you undo your pact."

She shook her head—to lose Lorcan would mean she would once again be vulnerable and outcast in the worst way. "I want …" she started, but trailed off, staring up at the silver eyes over the altar. She pressed the heels of her hands to her own eyes. "I just wish that

I could have a chance to breathe. I wish I could set aside the pact—or at least just the pressing parts, like Lorcan shouting at me—for a moment." She smiled wanly at the statue. "Some space. Like this, only fit for my pocket. But I don't think your goddess would take kindly to that."

When she looked back at Tam, she was surprised at the consternation and perhaps even grief that settled on his features.

She swallowed. "I didn't mean any offense. Just that … I'm not suited and … well, it's a beggar's miracle, isn't it? She has greater things to worry about than me."

His expression didn't change, but he turned to look back up at the altar. After a moment he spoke.

"And that's what I'm here for."

He left her sitting on the bench and went into the back room of the temple. When he returned he was holding a silver medallion on a thin, twisted chain.

"Here, take this."

"What is it?"

"A beggar's miracle," he said, and the twinkle had returned to his eyes. "Once between moonrises, call on it, and you'll get your respite. Cast it at him—or any fiend—and they cannot harm you. But, mind, it only lasts an hour. So don't use it to stir him up."

"I-I can't," she said. The amulet had to be worth *purses* of gold.

"You can," he said, pressing it into her hand. "It came in handy when I was in Thay, but I don't find it that useful anymore." He smiled crookedly. "Well, aside from the odd moment in the Neverwinter Wood."

She closed her hands around it, knowing she should demur, she should refuse. "How do I call on it?"

"Aim it at the devil and say *vennela,*" he said. "The amulet does the rest." He hesitated a moment. "This temple is only going to last another half-bell or so," he said. "And I don't know how much you heard—"

"Most of it," she admitted. She smiled uneasily. "I knew you weren't only a priest."

“You and everyone under the age of twenty, apparently,” Tam said dryly. “When you add those cultists after you, it’s pretty clear to me that as soon as your sister wakes, you need to get out of Neverwinter.”

She shook her head. “Not without Mehen. Or Brin.” She looked out at the ruined city beyond the entry. “The Ashmadai think the House of Knowledge has insulted them in some way. Something about orcs and a house by the water? They plan to attack the temple.”

Tam frowned. “What do orcs have to do with the House of Knowledge?”

Farideh shook her head. “I don’t know.” She bit her lip. “And there was something else, something Lorcan said. The hospitaler that runs things, Rohini, he called her the biggest viper of all. That hospital’s full of wounded guardsmen and acolytes who are just trying to help. You can’t really suggest we just leave them to be torn apart by all of this?”

“Farideh, you can’t save these people,” he said. “That’s why I came: to assess the stability of Neverwinter. We’ve been here two days and already I can tell you it’s as stable as a landslide.”

“Then we should warn them.”

Tam shook his head. “They knew, Farideh. They knew that coming here. The Wall. The Chasm. The orcs on the road. The mountain is still smoking. Even the Lord Protector’s men …” He shook his head. “And there’s so much more beneath the surface. Things as bad as your cultists and their orcs. There are rough times in Neverwinter’s future. They’re prepared, or they were never going to be prepared to begin with.”

“So you’re just going to leave?” she said, shaking her head. “Why is that better?”

“Because,” he said, “if what you’re saying is true, then this is going to happen soon. If you leave, you’ll be safe. What else are you going to do? Run around knocking on doors?”

“Stop the Ashmadai!” Farideh cried.

“And then what?”

“Stop Rohini.”

“And then? There will be more. There will be devils and dangerous people until their battles are resolved.” He stood. “There is being a hero and there is making a sacrifice of yourself because you imagine it will be better. You’re not the first person to mistake the difference.”

And he wasn’t the first person to tell her she couldn’t change the way Neverwinter would fall, she knew, thinking of Lorcan’s litany of horrors. She glanced over at Havilar, lying still on the stone floor. How many times are you going to lead her into danger? she thought. She rubbed her thumb over the amulet, the shape of an eye on one side, and a spiral on the other. She wound her thumb in to the center of the spiral and back out again. What could she do to protect Neverwinter anyway?

“You’re right,” she admitted. “We’ll go. As soon as we get Mehen and Brin.”

Tam shook his head. “We can come back for them later, but if there are cultists chasing you, I want you both out of the city.”

Farideh bit her tongue. “Fine,” she said after a moment, even though it was not fine. “Do me a simple favor at least? Tell the guards about the bodies in the shop. Send them to … at least put them to rest and watch for their comrades.”

Tam regarded her a moment. “That,” he said, “I will do. Stay here with Havilar. When she wakes, the two of you get to the South Gate and wait for me there.”

She nodded. The South Gate … which passed the House of Knowledge directly. She might not be able to save Neverwinter, but at least she’d warn the ones she cared about.

There were moments when Mehen’s thoughts seemed to clear enough for the dragonborn to realize he was in a terrible predicament. No amount of effort would let him move his limbs—not even to take the healing potion clipped to his falchion’s harness and take care of the broken wrist that lay swollen and screaming across his lap. He could not respond to anything except direct

questions. When Brin had stumbled into the room Rohini had left Mehen sitting in, he could do nothing but glare at the boy, willing him to notice the fact that Mehen would never have sat still while his daughters were missing and the fact that Mehen would have told him off instead of giving the boy the silent treatment.

Something is *wrong*, you *kosjor*, he fought to roar. But his throat didn't so much as twitch for all the effort, and Brin had wandered off puzzled.

Fari and Havi were missing—broken planes, why didn't the horror of that shake loose his paralysis? He had the vague memory, like a dream that he couldn't quite shake, of Farideh watching him with a worried expression, of Havilar hugging him around the neck, but no more would come. Surely … surely … they'd just wandered off?

That didn't soothe his nerves at all. How could he have let this happen?

The memory of Havilar throwing her arms around his neck thickened, and he heard her say, "… is a devil, and you're the only one …"

A devil. Lorcan. Shattered realms, he thought, don't let this be Lorcan's doing. He knew he ought to have killed the bastard.

But then there was another memory that crackled and popped and seemed to fight against him: A red-haired woman, a group of orcs, Arjhani … Arjhani, all apologies and promises. Had he any control he'd blush at the shame of still wanting Arjhani, after the way he'd left things. That had to be a dream.

The door banged open, and a young man Mehen had never seen before looked in. Whip thin, in dark armor stained with blood, the man looked at Mehen as if he were the last, lame horse left in the hostler's string. He sighed, rolled his eyes, and stepped into the room.

"Listen," he said, "I know you don't like me, but forget that for a moment. Farideh's in trouble." When Mehen didn't answer, he glanced down at himself and cursed. "It's Lorcan. I'll explain the look another time. Now, come help me."

Mehen would have grabbed Lorcan by the throat and shaken him until he told Mehen what had happened, why Farideh was in danger, and what in the Hells Lorcan had done.

"Did you hear what I said?" Lorcan snapped. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting," Mehen said automatically. He lifted his gaze to Lorcan's, but did not stand. "Waiting for orders." He frowned … the red-haired woman was Rohini … Rohini was the one giving orders …

"Orders?" Lorcan peered at Mehen a moment. "Beshaba, shit in my eyes—Rohini's dominated you, hasn't she?" Mehen said nothing, only glared at him. Why couldn't Brin have been the one to figure that out?

Something lit Lorcan's eyes, and a slow smile crept over face. "You're allowed to answer questions, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"But nothing else. That's rather sloppy of her." He stepped between Mehen and the lantern and stooped down to look the dragonborn in the eye. "Didn't give you permission to take care of that arm either." He reached down and plucked the healing potion from Mehen's harness. "And, look, she forgot to allow you to defend yourself." Lorcan shuddered as he drank the potion down.

"Why," he said, drawing his sword, "you're practically useless."

The tip of the sword pricked against the softer scales of Mehen's throat, but Lorcan seemed to be taking his time. If he thought he stirred fear up in Clanless Mehen, he was sorely mistaken: all the devil did was stoke the dragonborn's rage.

"It's not as if you wouldn't do the same," Lorcan said. "Rid your little girl of what might harm her, hmm?"

"I haven't yet," Mehen replied, not the torrent of threats he'd have liked to unleash at Lorcan's accidental question, but the simple truth. Much as he'd like to unmake the brazen bastard, he hadn't.

The sword point eased off.

"You hadn't the chance," Lorcan corrected. "I know as well as anyone I'm no one to trust."

Mehen would have agreed heartily with that. But he still hadn't ever tried to kill Lorcan. And while he'd never come upon Lorcan trapped in his own body in a dark and quiet room, he'd certainly let his soldier's mind plan how to kill the cambion a hundred different ways.

Lorcan seemed to be thinking the same thing. He lowered the sword and glowered at Mehen. "She thinks you haven't made her break the pact because you don't like priests. But I can't imagine there's a body out there you hate that much more than me. So why haven't you?"

Mehen listened for his own voice—it was a good question. How many nights had he made up his mind to march her straight to the nearest cleric, well-rehearsed in the best ways to feel out a church's stance on tieflings, unbelievers, and accidental warlocks? As many times as he'd thought of beating Lorcan senseless. And yet, every morning, he seemed to push those decisions aside, to wait for another time, another worry.

"Because," he heard himself say, after a long moment, "if she doesn't decide for herself, then it means nothing."

Lorcan's lip curled. "And I'll ruin things sooner or later." He glared off at a spot on the ground, then cursed. "She's smart. Smarter than you or I give her credit for. If I killed you, she'd figure out what happened, and as much as I'd like to think she'd see the merit in being free of your meddling, it's far more likely she'd spit in my face." He sheathed the sword. "I still need her. And I'm fairly certain—with Rohini after her—I'm of a use to her as well."

Mehen felt sure he would never get so near to respecting Lorcan again.

"Where is Rohini?" Lorcan asked.

"Away from here," Mehen replied.

"Is she in the Hells?"

"I don't know."

"How long has she been gone?"

"I don't know."

Lorcan sighed. "I suppose you'll have to find out what Rohini intends to do with you after all. I don't doubt Farideh will insist we

come back for you. But you can respect that I'll get her out if I can."

"And Havilar," Mehen said.

Lorcan startled. "You … the domination's wearing, isn't it? Can you move?"

"Yes, and no." There, the words came as before—a reply shaped only by the need of the question. He had no control over questions. But the spells binding his tongue were certainly loosening a bit.

Lorcan cursed. "Not fast enough. How long has—" He broke off in a sharp gasp as something struck him across the back, and he hit the floor. Brin stood over the cambion, holding Havilar's glaive in an awkward grip.

The corner of Mehen's mouth twitched upward. He might be forced to reconsider his opinion of Brin as well.

Lorcan reached back and cast a bolt of foul magic at the boy. Brin darted aside, but his feet caught on the length of the glaive and he tripped. Well, Mehen amended, not too much.

The energy started to swell in Lorcan's hands again, but spotting Brin, he seemed to rein himself in. He regarded Brin with the same distaste and uncertainty he'd favored Mehen with, and ultimately sighed and shifted to his feet.

"The not-quite paladin. Good. Get your holy self in here and wipe the domination from Mehen. Then I need you to get Farideh out of a church."

Brin blinked owlishly at him. "I'm … sorry? Where's Farideh?"

"What is so hard about this? She's holed up in a church on the other side of the city," Lorcan said, his temper rising. "I obviously can't go in. I need someone to go in and convince her to come out. Mehen, preferably. So hurry up."

"Who …" Brin squinted at him in the dim light. "Lorcan?"

Lorcan scowled. "Who else? Hurry up, before she does something foolish."

"Why does she need to leave a church?" Brin said. He came to his feet, a little unsteadily, but managed to scoop up Havilar's glaive at the same time. "And what did you do to Mehen?" He squinted at Lorcan again. "And why would you think I'd help you?"

“You’re not helping me,” Lorcan said, steering him over to the dragonborn. “You’re helping Mehen. He’s under a domination which I had nothing to do with, I’ll thank you to notice; that is Rohini’s doing. And he’s probably beaten to the Ninth Layer and back. That arm doesn’t look good.”

Brin kneeled in front of Mehen, looking at his injuries and waving a hand in front of Mehen’s eyes. “Why can’t he talk?”

“Part of the spell,” Mehen snapped.

“Just do your magic,” Lorcan said, “and fix it.” He glanced back at the doorway. “Where’s Havilar?”

“I don’t know,” Brin said, pulling a silvery medallion from his pocket. “I was hoping she was with Farideh.” Lorcan said nothing, but Mehen didn’t miss the sudden tightness of the cambion’s expression.

“Afraid?” Mehen managed.

“Never, if I can help it,” Lorcan retorted. “Do the damned prayer.”

Brin took a deep breath. “Loyal Fury, aid this servant of your justice.”

Nothing happened.

Lorcan covered his face with his hands. “Have you actually managed to fall in the last two days?”

“No!” Brin laid his hand again on Mehen’s battered arm. “It just … It doesn’t always work. I’m not a paladin. Loyal Fury,” he intoned, “aid this servant of your justice.”

This time there was a weak ringing sound, and a flash of light from the medallion spread over Mehen’s broken arm. The bones knitted with a *crack* and a pain that made Mehen wish he could cry out. It was still swollen, still tender, but the worst was fixed.

Lorcan peered down at Mehen. “You’re still dominated, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Mehen said irritably.

“Do it again.”

Brin began to speak the words of the prayer yet again, when Mehen felt the magic of the domination slowly begin to surge. Rohini was returning. He fought to speak, but his tongue wouldn’t

move. He fought to stand, to push the young men aside, but his legs refused. He fought to shake his head, to signal them to stop, but only managed to twitch to one side.

A burst of light exploded out of Brin's hands and over Mehen's skin, and for a moment, the dragonborn couldn't breathe, there were so many ghosts and promises choking off his heart. When the light cleared, he saw Brin standing unsteadily, one hand pressed to his forehead.

"That … I shouldn't …"

The part of the spell that bound Mehen's voice snapped, weakened by Brin's magic or perhaps just Mehen's determination. The power of Rohini's magic pressed against him like a wave, ready to overtake him.

"Flee, damn it!" Mehen roared. "She's coming!" The domination swelled again, silencing him and forcing his mind down under Rohini's.

Coalescing into herself, the disembodied fragments of Rohini's awareness realized first that she had no sense of how much time had passed; second, that her head ached as if it were ready to split.

The room came next, and the hand she pressed to her temple. The darkness. She sat up from the cot she lay on and made her form flow into the shape of the kind-faced hospitaler once again. The rain spattering the windows.

She remembered the rain starting. She couldn't have lost too much time.

Rohini rolled her shoulders and stood. Killing the Ashmadai had probably not been exactly what Invadiah had planned—but that was Invadiah's fault for not being clearer. Along with a hundred other slights. When Glasya had ordered her to serve under Invadiah, Rohini had—of course—not voiced her horror, but there had not been a second that she hadn't suspected the arrangement was some sort of punishment for one or both of them.

She ought to be rewarded for waiting this long to lash out, she thought. If anyone got angry, she could just point to Lorcan. Simple and clean.

Almost. She was still furious with herself for picking the wrong twin. She'd held the rod, but she should have been certain. She should have been careful. She swept into the disused cell where she'd left the dragonborn, silent and waiting.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Mehen.

"Numb," he said. She chuckled.

"Tell me, did Lorcan come by yet?"

The dragonborn gave her a jaundiced look. The domination was wearing thin. "I saw a young man," he said. "A human, wearing black armor. I saw another who—"

"Enough," Rohini said. "I don't need to hear about your day." Lorcan would come looking soon enough, and she'd be very happy to report she'd left his warlock standing outside an Ashmadai safe-house, holding Invadiah's precious implement, and waiting for the alarm spells to call more Asmodean cultists to the dead Ashmadai's aid. Delightful.

Mostly. There had been the embarrassing moment where she'd pointed the rod and the body hadn't reacted. She knew how to cast from another's body, but nothing worked. Not even the simplest spells were in her grasp at first. Because, she realized when Farideh's spell had blasted past her and into an Ashmadai cultist, she had taken the wrong damned twin.

The body she'd taken *had* known how to defend itself, how to turn the rod into a bludgeon, how to twist weapons out of her victims' hands. Admirable reflexes, she mused, remembering how she'd dodged between a pair of particularly nimble young women with very sharp blades, tripping one into the other and finishing the survivor. While Rohini worked to channel her own magic through the girl, it had been a minor thing to keep the twin's body fighting.

And the warlock had defended her, thinking she was saving her sister. Up until Rohini turned on Farideh herself, she hadn't suspected a thing. Of course, she'd still knocked her sister unconscious, driving Rohini out of the girl's body. But whatever had

gone wrong didn't matter. She was surely dead by now. The Ashmadai were too quick to retaliate, and she would never have left her sister lying on the floor.

Now, she would like nothing better than to return to her normal form, curl her wings around herself, and rest for a good long while. But Invadiah could not wait. Rohini needed to find Vartan and find out whether she needed to possess him too.

"Wait here," she said to Mehen. "Eat or sleep or whatever you need to do, but wait for me." The dragonborn glared at her with far more venom than he should have managed. Depths of the Abyss, she was getting sloppy as Arunika. Renew that domination, she thought as she passed from the room and into the greater hall. Yet another task on her ever growing list—

"Good evening, my dear."

Rohini startled out of her thoughts. Brother Vartan was sitting on one of the empty cots, a cask in his lap made of rough-hewn wood. He stared at her with over-wide eyes, a peculiar smile playing on his mouth.

"I brought you a gift," he said.

Rohini had to remind herself to smile shyly instead of snapping. She doubted the box contained Invadiah's precious aboleth—all Rohini ought to want—or an order to eviscerate Invadiah herself—which was all Rohini *did* want. "That's very kind. You had time to buy a gift after delivering our offer?"

"It took no time at all," Vartan said, his voice still strangely flat. "Open it."

Rohini took the ugly box from him, and set it on an empty cot. "Did you bring the orcs to the proxies?" she asked. "You spoke to them?"

"Open the box first. I want to see your face when you open it."

Lovestruck ass, she thought, a false smile plastered to her face. She hoped it was a necklace so she could strangle him with it later. She wrenched the rusty clasp open and lifted the lid …

The temple around Rohini melted with a shrill scream. Her vision went white, and the senses of her skin were gone, as if she floated

in the void between worlds. There was no temple, no Toril, no Rohini.

All she knew was the song. Like a lullaby from her demon youth, the lyrics of the discordance rose, unbidden to her lips.

"*The heir stands divided and the inheritance will crumble,*" she heard herself say, the most perfect music she had ever heard. "*The dragons scrabble at the dregs.*"

She fought against the madness winding itself around her—she was *Rohini*, she was the corruptor, not the corrupted. Her vision crackled, and the temple returned in fits and spurts. Her feet were solid on the ground, the humid air clung to her skin.

More words, more sounds, more images swirled in her head. Rohini clasped her forehead as her head split open and sickly light poured out.

The glistening light crawled over her skin, eating away her disguise. The plain robes became tight leather armor. Her frizzy curls became a vibrant plume of red. Her ruddy skin became coppery and smooth as silk. Veiny wings ripped from her back. Her eyes, she knew by Vartan's astonished stare, glowed ruby.

Rohini felt her control over him snap, but she could only worry about the power trying with all its might to remake her. "*Spirits surge behind the surface of the world, and they may make the land anew. But a misplaced pebble will cripple the strongest charger.*"

"You're not Rohini," Vartan said with a mad giggle. "You're a devil."

Rohini laughed, and the sound of her laughter blurred into the prophecies seeping up through her baser brain.

"I *am* Rohini!" she cried. "I am always Rohini." She bared her teeth in a grin. "And now I am more. Such a gift."

No, she thought, struggling to maintain herself, struggling to hold her mind together. This is not a gift, this is not Rohini. Not if I can't control it. She had to control it. Had to think. Had to dominate her own self.

"They will want to know who sent you," Vartan said. "They will want to know what you're doing here."

The words attempted to bubble out of Rohini, much as the prophecy had, but she reined them in, struggling against the force of the alien will perverting her own. She would not be the weak link.

Instead she said, “What benefits us benefits Asmodeus, and what benefits Asmodeus benefits us all.”

A slow, nervous smile curled Vartan’s mouth. “How interesting.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As it happened, it was a good thing Sairché had hidden herself away in the far corners of her mother's holdings instead of fleeing Malbolge. Glasya's summons came more quickly than she'd expected, and Sairché was kneeling before the archduchess moments later. The audience chamber was empty but for the two of them and the ever-present hellwasps.

"There are problems with my agents on Toril," the Lady of Malbolge said. "You will correct them." Sairché had hardly finished agreeing before the archduchess rattled off a series of peculiar orders and tore a portal open in the wall beside her.

Now Sairché stood in a dank, poorly lit underground room, a little devil made of shadow twining around her ankles. The floor was heaped with bodies—tieflings, humans, an elf or two, and maybe more. Enough blood it was hard to tell. Not so much, though, that she couldn't see the mark of Asmodeus branded on a few chests, embroidered on more sashes. Sairché pursed her mouth.

The eel-like devil flowed up her arm. "Where go?"

"That one," she said, pointing at a tiefling male near the top of the stack of bodies. "And *hurry*." The shadow devil chirruped to itself and flowed over the stack of bodies. It pried apart the dead man's jaws and wriggled down his throat.

The door at the top of the stairs opened. Sairché stepped back into the darkness and pulled her invisibility close.

Three men and a woman came rattling down the stairs, weapons out. All four wore sashes with the mark of Asmodeus on them. As Sairché watched, they fanned out, searching the basement for some sign of life, for someone they could kill. She stayed well out of their

reach, and after a few moments, they sheathed their weapons and turned their attention to the bodies.

"A wonder the alarms didn't sound sooner," one, a heavyset tiefling man, said. "Who could have done this?"

A taller tiefling man with gnarled horns leaned over the elf woman sprawled belly down across one pile. "This one's been blasted," he said. "One of them was a caster."

"There're enough wounds here to mark a caster, a blademaster, and someone with a club," the woman said. She shook her head. "This is too strange."

"It's not a sacrifice," the thicker tiefling said. "It would be a sacrifice if it were other cultists that did it. And they left the bodies." He nudged one with a foot. "Won't be the Thayans then."

"Do you know any of them?" the human man asked. "Any of you?"

"Bought supplies from Yvon a time or two," the woman said. "He's probably in there somewhere."

"It doesn't matter," the thicker tiefling said. "They were Ashmadai. Their deaths are an affront to the king of the Hells, and so an affront to us."

"All well and good," the taller one said. "But we have no idea who—"

The body the shadow devil had climbed into threw up a hand to claw at the open air. Together, the living Ashmadai pulled him free, a tiefling man with the insignia of a cell leader, his chest blistering and cracked by magical fire, his face a ruin of shattered bone. He could not stand on his own, and so they settled him on the floor.

"Who did this?"

The man swallowed, blinking his eyes at the world around him, as if he weren't sure it was really there. "It was the warlock," the shadow devil said in the man's voice. "The tiefling. She came from the hospital—her robes were their blue ones. She … and orcs. Orcs with blades and terrible spellscars."

Sairché had to give the little monster credit: it remembered every line and sold it all well. Spellscars, Sovereignty, and a mad-eyed

tiefling. Sairché frowned. She hoped it wasn't the Brimstone Angel she was setting up.

Don't be so foolish as to hope, she told herself. You'll have to deal with that later.

He shuddered, his breath caught, and his last words rushed out of him in a whisper. "She led them here. She said it was at the behest of the Sovereignty. Her powers came from the Chasm. You must stop them before …" The man shuddered and collapsed, dead.

"Well," the woman said. "That's a stroke of luck. Hail Asmodeus indeed."

"Don't be flippant," the man said. "We must bring this to the others." He looked out over the bodies. "I swear we will avenge this slight." The other three repeated the promise, and Sairché rolled her eyes.

"What of the bodies?" the tall tiefling asked.

"Get Pellegri up here to guard," the thicker one said. "And round up some fuel. We'll have to burn the place down before the city guard notices." They clomped back up the stairs.

Exactly, Sairché thought, as Glasya had ordered. They ate up every word. Though why this was necessary and why the Sovereignty needed to be implicated in the deaths of some cultists still made no sense. People killed Ashmadai every day, and it was no surprise. Why did Glasya care about these? The shadow devil squirmed free of the dead tiefling and flowed across the floor to her.

"Well done," she said.

"Home now?" the little devil asked.

"In a sense," Sairché replied, grabbing hold of its neck. It squalled and kicked, but she held it tight and slammed the little thing's body against the stone edge of a support column. Its neck gave a sharp crack, and the corpse burst into flames.

Her first mission finished, Sairché left the dead Ashmadai behind as she passed through the portal, but they remained on her mind for quite some time afterward.

The last thing Havilar remembered was knowing she ought to be terrified. The almost overpowering calm that pressed on her when she opened her eyes again stirred a momentary storm when mixed with her panic, and she sat up thrashing even harder against whatever might be there.

Nothing. No claws trying to grab her. No devils in the shadows. Just a quiet little temple that she'd never seen before and Havilar, in her bloody, bloody armor.

"Gods," she breathed. It was an obscene amount of blood.

"Havi?" Havilar looked around and saw her sister—her robes spattered with black gobs of dried blood, her eyes haunted, and her cheeks streaked—nearly running down the short aisle that the benches made. "Havi, are you all right? Are you …" She trailed away and stopped a step from Havilar. "Havi?"

Havilar's head spun. "Whose blood is it?"

Farideh kneeled down beside her. "People who were trying to kill you," she said.

"How many?" she asked, and Havilar heard her voice shake. "What happened? What *happened?*" Farideh hugged her tight, and despite the insistent calming magic of the temple, Havilar burst into tears.

M'henish, Havilar thought bitterly, somewhere under the roiling panic that made her cling to her sister as if there were no better anchor in the world. Now she'd be the delicate one too. But the sobs came in great crashing waves, and she could no more rise above them than she could swim the Sea of Fallen Stars.

"It's going to be all right," Farideh said, but she didn't sound sure at all. "We're going to be all right."

"It should have *always* been all right!" Havilar cried, pushing her away. "What *happened?*"

Farideh sat back on her heels. "I did something … unwise—"

"Oh, there's a surprise—"

"I went back to that shopkeeper. I was looking for … for a way to make Lorcan leave me be. He said he could help. I think he mistook me for something else. A cultist of Asmodeus."

Havilar blinked at her, hiccupping from the sobs. What did that have to do with anything? “Did you tell him you are from Tymanther?”

“That’s not … They were devil-worshipers!” Farideh shook her head. “They think the hospital is arranged against them—I don’t understand why—but they figured out I was staying there and they were about to kill me and …” She pursed her lips. “You came in.”

“I don’t remember that.” Havilar looked down at the mess of her armor. “So I saved you?”

“Sort of,” Farideh said. “Something was … in you. Fighting through you. I’m not sure … Tam said you were ‘tampered with.’ By a fiend.” She peered at Havilar. “Do you remember anything?”

Havilar wrapped her arms around her knees. She searched her memory but there was nothing. She had been practicing with her glaive in the House of Knowledge … and then she’d woken up on the floor covered in the blood of devil-worshipers.

“How did you get me here?” she asked, still staring into the hollow of her legs.

“Knocked you out and put you on a donkey,” Farideh said with a little, empty laugh. “I think we can agree your record stands, under the circumstances.”

Havilar didn’t laugh. She was shaking and crying like an infant, she’d been manhandled or mindhandled or something by a devil, and Farideh had managed to knock her out cold in a fight. Nothing was all right. “I want my glaive. I feel *naked.*”

“Havi?” Havilar looked up. “Could it have been Lorcan?”

She made a face. “I don’t remember. I can’t … He wouldn’t have done that, right?”

Farideh shook her head again, as if she didn’t know, as if *no one* could know. “Lorcan sent that damned orc. He might do anything.” She got that faraway look again, as if she were trying to decide what would go wrong next tenday, and Havilar sighed. At least that was the same.

“I found something out that you should know,” Farideh said. “About warlocks. About us. I—”

The world lurched and flashed bright, and Havilar fell half a foot, landing hard on gravel and stone chips that cut into her palms. Beside her, Farideh broke off with a yelp and landed on her hands and knees. Havilar's nerves exploded and she sprang forward and grabbed her sister's arm tight.

The temple was gone.

"It's all right," Farideh said. "It was only temporary. We need to get moving."

Havilar searched the shadows around them. Could she even recognize a soul-seizing devil if she saw one? She kept clinging to Farideh as they stood together. "Where?"

Farideh drew a deep breath. "We need to meet Tam at the South Gate. But we can't leave without Mehen and Brin. We have to go back to the hospital. Are you up for it?"

No—all Havilar wanted was to curl up in a ball in a hole on an island where no one was and wait for things to settle. Cowardly thoughts, and she was not the cowardly one. She was not going to leave Mehen behind, and she was not going to let Farideh be the one to save Brin. She would just have to get all of her panicking done before anything got bad. She could do that. Probably.

"I want my glaive," she said, letting go of her sister's arm. "And we need to walk a little slow. At first. My legs are stiff."

Farideh glanced around the square. "I'd offer the donkey, but it's wandered off."

"Probably something ate it," Havilar said morosely.

"Good. Then it's not hungry for us." She squeezed Havilar's hand and pulled the rod from her own sleeve. "Let's go."

They wound their way toward the main road, still hand in hand, Havilar still shaking. Farideh was pretending not to notice—Havilar was sure. Gods, if she just had a weapon in her hands.

A weapon didn't help you before, dummy, she thought.

The lights were few and far between in this part of the city, and the ruined roads were perilous. When they stepped out of the dark into the light of a pair of magical streetlights set over a recently cleared crossroads, it felt like a miracle. The rain had lightened to a drizzle, enough to make the approaching sound of arguing voices

clear. Farideh stopped and pulled Havilar behind a piece of broken wall. “Hush.”

“It’s clear,” one voice said. “Are you going to do this at every crossroads?”

Havilar straightened. “Brin?” She crept forward to peer around the wall. Silhouetted in the lights she saw two shapes, two men—one of them short and slim enough to pass for much younger.

“Brin!” she cried. Havilar ran, dragging Farideh with her for a few feet before their hands broke apart.

“Havi!” Farideh shouted, but Havilar didn’t care what she was worried about. It was Brin, looking up at her shout; Brin, she threw her arms around; Brin she nearly bowled over. He hugged her back tightly with one arm. When she pulled away, she nearly wept at the sight.

“Gods, you’re here. You’re safe. And you brought my *glaive.*” She hugged him again. *This*, she thought, is all right. This is normal. This is good.

“Why are you bloody?” Brin asked.

“She’s had a rough night,” Farideh said. Havilar glanced back and saw her staring intently at the other man—a fellow taller than them both, with dark blond hair that curled to his collar, and very black eyes that were watching Farideh like she might lash out with her sword at any moment.

He smiled—and something in Havilar’s memories turned over.

“Lorcan,” Farideh said.



The man smiled—and Farideh never thought that smile could be frightened, but somehow on a human face it was. Her scar started to prickle.

“Lorcan,” she said.

“Well met, darling,” he said. “Are you all right?”

“No.”

“Farideh—”

“No.” Farideh pushed Havilar and Brin behind her and yanked the amulet out from her under her robes, pointing it at Lorcan.

He took a step back. “What is that?”

Farideh thought back to Tam’s words. “A beggar’s miracle. *Vennela.*”

The amulet made no light or sound, but suddenly Lorcan was screaming as his skin flared red, wings sprouted from his back and horns from his brow, and the blackness of his eyes spread from lid to lid. He fell to his knees.

Brin grabbed her shoulder. “Gods, stop it!”

Stronger than her rage, guilt slammed into her chest like a physical thing—the sound of Lorcan’s scream was so like Havilar’s when the arrows hit, so like Farideh’s own chasing after it. Animal, fearful, pained—whatever the amulet did it was *hurting* him. Tam hadn’t mentioned that.

The change finished and Lorcan’s screams collapsed into painful gasps for air. He looked up through his disheveled hair at Farideh. “You went over to that priest!”

What he meant to do, she didn’t know. As quickly as he was moving at her, the amulet’s power reacted and a silvery burst of magic exploded over his outstretched hand before he could touch her. Lorcan cried out again, clutching his burned hand to his chest.

“Keep back,” she said, pointing the rod at him. “If you test its limits again, I’ll make sure they don’t matter.”

“Give me that amulet.”

Farideh narrowed her eyes. “Try and take it.”

He moved forward again and this time she let loose a bolt of fire. It shouldn’t have hurt him—she knew he, like she, didn’t burn easily. She wanted to startle him, to slow him down. But the blaze that burst from the rod was hotter, brighter than expected. It struck his upraised arms and broke into cinders, but it singed his armor nonetheless and forced him back several steps.

“I am *trying* to help!” he roared. “You *are* a little fool if you—”

“I don’t need your help anymore,” she interrupted. “Go.”

“Damn it!” Lorcan snapped. “I’m not losing you to Sairché and I’m not losing you to the shitting moon goddess. Give me the amulet

and stop playing around."

Something in her cracked.

"You cannot lose me because I'm *not* your pet!" she shouted, hurling a bolt with each curse. "I'm *not* your bauble! I'm *not* your prize!" Lorcan dodged and ducked, but as he covered his face, the last bolt hit his arms and threw him backward. Farideh stormed toward him, her fury plain in the miasmic shadows that swirled around her. She shoved the tip of the rod under his chin, her hands shaking with rage and the powers of the Hells roiling through her.

"I'm not a fool. You don't *tell* me what to do," she said. "And don't you lay a *hand* on me."

Lorcan stared up at her, still short of breath and more stunned than enraged. Wounded, she thought. Betrayed.

To the Hells with him and his betrayal.

"This rod is more than you said," she said. "Isn't it?"

He swallowed. "Yes."

"Tell me what it does." He hesitated, and she jabbed the point against his throat. "Tell me what it does or I will gladly blow your *karshoji* head into the ground."

A smile flickered at his mouth. "I don't know why you ever worried about me corrupting you. My virtuous warlock, a cold-blooded killer for the moon goddess's pleasure." At least you've an audience to appreciate your transformation. His eyes darted over her shoulder, and Farideh glanced back to where Havilar and Brin stood, watching her with wide, frightened eyes. She pursed her lips and turned back to Lorcan, still lying on the ground.

"Leave them out of this," she said. "Tell me what it does."

"Or what?"

Or what, indeed. This close and she might burn away the soft part of his throat, right in front of her eyes. The blowback would scar her knuckles and maybe worse. He knew she wouldn't. He wasn't afraid of her.

"I think the Ashmadai would leave me be if I gave you to them," she said. "I'll bet Rohini would too, if what you said is true."

His mouth went small. "Don't. Don't even play with that one."

"Tell me what it does."

“Farideh, she’ll *kill* you. She won’t care if you’re mine or not any longer.”

“Better than being your oblivious plaything,” she said. “That isn’t how we’re doing things any longer. If it’s because we’re both dead, well, that wasn’t my plan either. So it’s your choice.”

Lorcan watched her. Wounded, she thought again. Defeated.

Fine. He could feel trapped and terrified for a bit too.

He wet his lips. “That is the Rod of the Traitor’s Reprisal,” he said. “It enhances your casting and … amplifies some of your spells. The fiery ones in particular, it seems. But only if you are defending yourself against someone bound to the same fiend.” Was it her imagination, or could Lorcan no longer meet her eyes? “I gave it to you to protect you from the orc in case he went after you.”

“Why did it work on you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “You are bound to me, but it’s all a chain, isn’t it? I answer to Invadiah, so you do as well. And eventually all of us answer to Glasya, who answers to Asmodeus—for all *I* know the rod works on everyone who serves beneath the god of evil.”

“I do *not* serve Asmodeus.”

He laughed bitterly. “Whatever you say, darling.”

“Why did I have the rod?” Havilar asked.

“What?” Lorcan lifted his head, forcing the tip of the implement into his throat. Farideh hesitated, but pulled it back so he could sit up. “When did you have it?”

“Fari said I had it when I killed the Ashmadai,” she said. “There’s … Fari, there might be someone’s … blood and things on it.” The rod was indeed caked with blood and pinkish flesh. “But why did I have it instead of my glaive?”

Lorcan peered at it. “Did you beat someone to death with it?” He looked up and seemed to register for the first time the fact that Havilar was stained tip to toe in blood. He swore ripely. “What happened?”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Farideh said.

Lorcan fumed at her. “Stop trying to be difficult and tell me what in the Hells happened.”

“I don’t remember.” Havilar started trembling again, and Brin put an arm around her shoulders.

“Farideh,” Lorcan said. But it wasn’t a threat or a chastisement this time. “Please.”

“Something took Havilar over,” she said. “Brought her to an Ashmadai meeting place and killed the lot of them.”

“ ‘Took her over’?” Lorcan said. “Ashes. And she was carrying the rod? You don’t remember anything and you killed, what, a dozen Ashmadai? A score?”

Havilar shook her head. Her knuckles whitened around the glaive.

Lorcan swore again. “Nothing? Not even as you’d remember a dream?” Again, Havilar shook her head. Lorcan turned back to Farideh. “This is very, very bad. We need to get somewhere safe.”

“*We* don’t need to get anywhere,” Farideh said. “Havilar and I need to get Mehen and—”

“And if you try you’re going to be killed,” Lorcan said, pulling himself to his feet. “Possibly *by* Mehen. Listen to me, darling, this time I’m useful.”

Farideh kept the rod pointed at him. “Mehen wouldn’t … he wouldn’t do that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lorcan said. “Rohini is a devil. She’s a succubus. She’s here for … darling, let’s put it as such: you do not send Rohini to cause mere mischief. And Rohini has Mehen in thrall. He’ll do whatever she says, whenever she says it.”

“Mehen?” Farideh said. “That’s not possible.”

“I was going to ask, how does a succubus …” Brin said. “I mean he’s a dragonborn.”

Lorcan rolled his eyes. “She doesn’t need to bed him, you dolt. She just has to get close enough to dominate him.” He smirked. “Besides … she’s a shapechanger. If she wanted to she could bed just about anything under the sun.”

“Is that what happened to Havi?” Farideh asked. “Rohini dominated her?”

“No,” Lorcan said. “Being dominated is like a dream. You’re watching yourself act. You’re aware, you just can’t do a thing about

it. If Havi doesn't remember, she was possessed." He regarded Farideh soberly. "Which means Rohini is even more dangerous than I previously supposed, and our problem is growing rapidly."

Possessed. Farideh kept the rod pointed at Lorcan, clinging tightly to it as if the implement were holding her up and not the other way around. Lorcan couldn't hurt her under the amulet's compulsion, but she could hurt him. She wanted to hurt him.

"I don't believe you," she said, and she wanted him to stumble, to lie, to give her more reasons not to trust him. She wanted to hurt him—some part of her wanted to *obliterate* him.

Give me a reason, she thought. Give me an excuse to reduce you to ashes and bones. Give me a reason to shove these stupid hopes aside and get rid of you before you hurt me again.

But then he sighed. "Normally, you *shouldn't*. You know that and I know that, and I'm not foolish enough to pretend otherwise with that rod pointed at my heart." There was no bravado, no threat, no wheedling, coaxing tone in his voice. "But this time, darling, if you don't trust me you are going to die. Havilar is going to die. Mehen is certainly going to die."

"You're just repeating your threats," she said. That was reason enough wasn't it?

"Farideh," he said. "Farideh, look at her. Look at the blood. Rohini did that. Rohini slaughtered an army in Havilar's body and left her to answer for it. You know why she did that."

"Stop it," Farideh said, as Havilar—her brash, brave, reckless sister—started to shake again. She could not hold the rod on Lorcan and comfort Havilar. "Stop it."

"Farideh, please," he said. "Listen. That was supposed to be *you*. Why else put the rod in Havilar's hand? Rohini took the wrong twin. My darling, you're supposed to be dead, because we are both mixed into this now."

Do not trust him, she thought. Do not.

"If she realizes you're alive, she will make certain it's not for long." He shuddered. "Or worse. Much worse. You have to leave. You cannot get tied up in her plans. Let her think you're dead."

“What is she planning?” And how do I know you’re not a part of that plan too? she thought. Or some worse, greater plan?

How could she claim innocence if Lorcan held her reins?

“Get out of the street,” Lorcan pleaded. “I will tell you everything I know, just come out of the open. It’s not safe.”

Farideh shook her head. “Nowhere is safe with you.”

Lorcan started to retort but his eyes caught on something over her shoulder. “Shit and ashes.”

Farideh heard Havilar’s sharp intake of breath. Heard Brin’s whispered prayer. She turned back the way she and Havilar had come to see two creatures heading toward them, as unstoppable and imminent as a thunderstorm on the horizon.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The creatures towered over Farideh on hooved feet that threatened to crack the cobblestones. Their skin was red as hot irons, and their eyes were black as Lorcan's. Their armor sucked in what remained of the light and their swords gleamed in the dim. Crowned by rows of cruel horns, one was whip-thin and red-haired, the other black-tressed, with a thick scar running down her throat and across her breastbone, down under the armor plate.

As Farideh stared—the splinters of seconds—they closed.

Lorcan grabbed hold of her arm, and in her terror and rage, Farideh started to draw up the powers to cast a spell—but even before she could, he had pulled her behind him and out of harm's way. His eyes locked on the creatures.

"Go!" he said. "Run, darling, fast and far."

Farideh wanted to ask what they were. She wanted to ask what they wanted. She wanted to call him out, to be suspicious of these sudden heroics that didn't so much as agitate the amulet's magic. But the only words that left her mouth were those that cast a bolt of fire that turned into a torrent of hellfire. It crashed against the raven-haired monster and splashed flames onto her sister.

Both flinched. Neither cried out as the flames burnt them.

The redhead sneered. "Rohini hasn't caught your little pet yet?"

"How amusing," the other said. "Won't she be livid when we do it for her, Aornos?"

"Let's bring her the head," Aornos said.

Her sister's cold black eyes flicked over Farideh. "No, no: the hands."

Aornos chuckled. "Oh, Nemea, how clever."

Lorcan reached back and pushed Farideh away. “Run, damn it.” He cast his own bolt of flames, but the devils closed in on him. And Farideh.

Fear held her reins now, a wild thing urging her to kick and strike and cast with abandon. But the devils were stronger, faster. Wilder. Their swords were graceful and quick, the lightning strikes of their relentless storm.

She saw the trail of blood along her arm before she felt the searing pain of the blade, and as she noticed it, the sword bit again slicing through the robe and the leather of her shirt and into her wounded hip. The nearer one grinned down at her, her black eyes cold and malevolent.

Lorcan was right, Farideh thought. I’m going to die.

She had forgotten, as the devils had in their fervor to kill Lorcan, that there were more than the two of them in this fight.

They hadn’t counted on Havilar, that blanched and shivering girl, to shake loose her shock, take up her glaive, and become a blur of metal and blood, her blade as good as her right hand.

Havilar dived across the courtyard, throwing herself behind the weight of the polearm. With a crack, the blade—aimed just so—split the Hell-forged armor of the black-haired devil standing over Farideh, and buried itself in her back. Nemea’s eyes widened as the blade plunged so deeply Farideh heard a rib bone snap. As swiftly as she’d struck, Havilar twisted, planting her foot on the back of the devil’s thigh, just above her knee. She yanked loose the glaive and buckled Nemea’s knee in one motion. Then she spun the glaive’s spike-capped end upward as Nemea fell and Aornos turned, and smashed it into the redhead’s unprotected nose and cheek. The strike was imperfect—the bone didn’t shatter as it had when she’d hit the Ashmadi cultist—but it startled Aornos and bloodied her nose with viscous, black fluids.

Nemea’s sword sliced toward Havilar’s knees. Havilar moved to block with the haft of the glaive—it will snap, Farideh thought, and then snap Havilar as well.

“*Assulam*!” The word flowed out of her mouth on a stream of foul magic that engulfed Nemea’s sword and shattered it into a cloud of

rust.

Another cry overtook Farideh's curse, a fierce, wordless war cry chased by the sound of a sword unsheathing. Brin. Brin, but his voice was no half-grown boy's, but a voice buoyed by the force of a god. Farideh remembered him yelling in the forest as he attacked Lorcan, his pitiful war cry, all the more pitiful next to this towering bellow.

The devils froze—as if they did not know the sound, as if they did not know what was happening. Lorcan's sword lashed out, slashing Aornos's sword arm. She stood the pain well enough to parry his following strike, but Brin's sword drove forward, sliding under her pauldron. Aornos shrieked and kicked backward, catching Brin's legs and throwing him backward and across the cobbles. Brin rolled and came to his feet—

Nemea's hoof slammed into Farideh like a charging bull, knocking her to the ground and pinning her by Farideh's right shoulder. Nemea reached down and pulled Farideh's short sword from her belt. She tested the weight of it with a sneer. No match, it seemed, for her shattered sword.

Match enough to take Farideh's hands off.

The butt of Havilar's glaive cracked across Nemea's face, rocking her back onto her other foot long enough for Farideh to roll away. Enraged, the devil swung her shield out to knock Havilar back, but the tiefling was too quick. As she clambered to her feet, Farideh caught a glimpse of Havilar's flushed face, concentration and unbridled eagerness warring in her features, before Farideh cast another of the shimmering bolts of energy into Nemea's chest.

Swords clashed. Aornos pressed Lorcan back. He parried and blocked, his swordwork nearly as clean as the devil's, but one glance at Aornos showed she was hardly making an effort. Lorcan, on the other hand, looked as if a gnat across his field of vision would break his concentration, make him slip, and kill him.

It would be easy, she thought. Call out his name, and he'd look over. Long enough for the devil to break his defense.

She could lose him. She could let the pact go.

Her chest squeezed and the powers of the Hells churned her stomach sick.

Aornos swung her sword into Lorcan's, catching the blade on his guard. One swift, savage thrust and the force of her blade broke his grip. His sword clattered to the ground. Aornos bashed her shield into his chest and he fell, splayed out on the ground like a sacrifice. She raised her sword again.

There was no place for thought. Farideh shouted the words of a spell she'd used only once, when Lorcan had shown it to her some other dark night in some other crumbling town. Screamed them with everything left in her. The ground beneath Aornos turned molten and swallowed her hooves. Then the fire that should have leaped out of the ground like a fountain instead burst forth like a waking volcano.

Aornos's screams pierced Farideh to her very marrow. Still she readied the next spell, the blast of energy that she'd first learned. When the fires fell away, she cast it, and the crackling light enveloped the devil. Her screams broke off and she collapsed in a heap.

Only for a moment though—the body suddenly burst into greasy flames and within seconds, the fire had devoured Aornos.

Farideh spared the slightest, most secretive glance at Lorcan as he pulled himself to his feet and snatched up his sword, before turning her rod toward the remaining devil. But she wasn't needed.

Nemea collapsed across the broken cobbles with a noisy clatter and Havilar's glaive planted in her ribs. She groaned once and burst into flames as Aornos before her had done.

Havilar wrenched her glaive free and planted it in the scorched and ruined cobbles.

"Devilslayer," she said with relish. She looked over at Brin, who still held his bloodied sword in a shaking hand. "Are you going to be sick again?"

"No," Brin said, looking gray. To his credit, he kept his dinner down. Havilar patted his back.

The square was quiet—alarmingly so after the clamor of the devils and the clash of weapons. There was only the soft patter of

the drizzling rain, which served to mute things further and wash away the smells of blood and brimstone. If anyone had heard them, they'd stayed well away. Lorcan crept up beside her.

"What in the Hells were those?" Farideh demanded.

"Erinyes," Lorcan said, his voice taut and clipped. "The archduchess's enforcers."

"Are there more?"

"Not now. They were only supposed to take me." He shifted. "There will be more if we wait much longer."

"We need to get out of the street." She started to walk, but the light, tentative touch of Lorcan's hand stopped her.

"You could have let her kill me," he pointed out.

"I could have."

He waited, agitated, as if he expected her to say more. "You're not terribly skilled at being a cold-blooded killer, are you? First you can't blow my head off, then you can't even let someone else's sword take me."

"You're right," Farideh said. "We need to get out of the street."

There had been a building between the square and the temple, not yet demolished and partly swallowed by the last creeping edge of a lava flow that had obliterated the nearby street. Silent as a winter night, and empty. Brin and Havilar followed her as she strode briskly toward it.

There was a gust of flapping wings, and Lorcan landed in front of her. "*Why* did you stop her?"

"Stop it," she said.

"Afraid your 'sword' would be ruined?" he said.

Farideh paused and looked him in the eye. "I'm not like you." She pressed past him and farther up the street. The amulet would still hold for a good part of an hour; let him rage at her all he liked.

But she heard nothing but footsteps as she reached the broken building.

They climbed over the vein of rock and in through a window. The stairs had long since rotted or burned away. Lorcan flew to the upper story and disappeared, while the other three helped one

another climb the crumbling stones of the walls. The floor above was mostly intact, although it, like the whole building, leaned.

Brin led Havi over to the lowest corner of the floor where she finally admitted her ankle was hurting and the bloody patch growing on her sleeve was a deep cut on her arm.

Lorcan stood by the window, scanning the streets below. For all that had happened in the street, it gave her a kick of terror to see him standing there, where Havi and Brin could see him—these two parts of her life weren't meant to interact.

"You knew them," she said.

"My sisters," he said. "My half-sisters. Nemea and Aornos."

"Oh." And she couldn't help but imagine their positions exchanged—Havilar dead by his sword. "I'm so sorry."

"Why?"

"… They're dead. We killed them."

He shrugged. "They would have killed us. Me, in particular, with a great deal of glee. Besides, they're not dead like you'd hope—you kill a devil on Toril, they reform in the Hells." He looked over at her. "It's complicated. Don't …" He trailed off though, and didn't tell her not to worry about it. "They can't come here. Not for now."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"I have fifty-eight half-sisters," he said.

"We took care of those other ones. Those erinyes," Havilar said, testing the word, "pretty handily. We'll do it again. Just stand aside next time."

"Nemea and Aornos are easily the stupidest, laziest, and least dangerous of all my half-sisters. They still could have killed you in a heartbeat if you weren't lucky and they weren't cocky." He turned back to the window and gripped the sill. "When the next wave comes, Invadiah will send better soldiers. And more of them. If she doesn't come herself. You can think yourself whatever sort of hero you like, but Invadiah will cut you down all the same."

Farideh swallowed, imagining an army of the fearsome devil-women, their swift and shining swords, their nigh-unbreakable armor. "Why are they here?"

He scowled. “Because someone has thrown me over to the wolves. They think I’ve betrayed my mother. Or worse, Glasya.” His dark eyes met Farideh’s. “They won’t stop—not until I’m dead or I convince Invadiah I’m no traitor. They knew you too.”

“I heard that. You were right about Rohini then. That was supposed to be me.”

“She’ll be looking for you.”

“But why? Who is she?”

He looked down at her, still puzzled, still angry. “Rohini is a devil,” he said after a breath. “A succubus. She is the main agent—maybe the only agent—of Glasya, Lord of the Sixth Layer, in Neverwinter.”

“What about you?” Brin asked.

Lorcan scowled at him. “I live at Glasya’s pleasure, but I don’t act on her orders.”

“What is Rohini doing here?” Farideh asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea.” He sighed. “You won’t understand, but I have worked very hard not to have the faintest idea.”

“She’s spellscarring orcs,” Havilar said matter-of-factly. “Even I know that.”

Lorcan shrugged. “That could be her goal. That could be a step to something bigger. That could be an act so far ahead of her eventual goal that no one but Glasya could uncover what it is. I don’t know if Invadiah even knows, and she’s commanding Rohini. Devils don’t do things they way you do.”

“Think,” Farideh said. “You must have heard something, if you know that much.”

He shook his head resolutely, as if he didn’t want to remember. “Old ones,” he finally said. “She said she couldn’t risk the old ones.”

Old ones? Farideh thought. Gods, could they be any more vague? “Old whats? Risk them what?” But Lorcan only shook his head.

“They *said* arbalests,” Havilar said. “Or habolets. A sovereignty of habolets.”

“Havi, that’s not even a word,” Farideh said.

“I’m only saying what I—” Havilar started, but a horrified gasp cut her off.

“Aboleths?” Brin said, staring at her.

“Oh,” Havilar said. “Maybe. That makes more sense than giving orcs to an arbalest. Aren’t aboleths sea monsters though?”

When they’d crossed the Sea of Fallen Stars to take the northern passage, the sailors had scanned the skies constantly for any sign of the aboleths. Hulking monsters, they’d told her, large as whales. Swam through water and air alike. They might pass a ship by, might render another into nothing but blood and splinters floating on the water, might coat all aboard a third with a layer of slime that sank into your head and warped your mind, making you into a servant with hardly a will of your own. Mehen had snorted and called them ridiculous tales, but he made Farideh and Havilar stay below deck.

“They’re going to be disappointed those orcs can’t swim,” Havilar said.

Farideh bit her tongue and did not ask where Havilar had gotten the idea that orcs couldn’t swim. “What would Rohini want to treat with an aboleth for?” she asked Brin.

But Brin still sat, wide-eyed with horror. “Not *an* aboleth,” he said. “They’re dealing with the Abolethic Sovereignty.”

“Is that … like a herd of aboleths?” Farideh asked.

“It’s what controls them.” He shook his head. “Or something. Look, aboleths aren’t like regular creatures. They’re … they know things. And what one knows, they all know. Their memories are shared. The Sovereignty is like the mind that steers things. Maybe.” He sighed. “I’m not explaining it well, but I don’t know if anyone can explain it well. People aren’t supposed to know these things.”

“I quite agree,” Lorcan said.

“Why would Rohini be dealing with aboleths of any sort?” Farideh asked.

“Because,” Lorcan replied, “the archduchess of the Sixth Layer said to. That’s all you need to know.”

Farideh twisted the ends of her hair. “Then maybe she’s making a pact of some sort with the Abolethic Sovereignty?”

“No,” Brin said. “I mean, I don’t think so. They don’t make treaties. They don’t make pacts. I don’t even think they talk to other powers. They don’t *think* like anything else does. It would be like

you making an agreement with a tree. Why would you? The tree doesn't have anything you couldn't just take, and the tree can't use anything you could give it."

"And," Lorcan added, "making treaties is not Glasya's style. She does things on her own, and your aboleths couldn't take what they'd like from her."

Farideh frowned. Why bother trying to please a monster if the creature wasn't a threat to you, wasn't an ally for you, and didn't have something you wanted? After all, what would an archdevil do with a sea monster's treasures?

"Would she want their memories?" she asked Brin. "That's what you said, right? They share their memories? So if you were able to read the memories of one?"

"You'd have a million years of memories," he said, "starting with the first aboleths. And … I don't know what's true about them, but I've heard they absorb the memories of those they eat as well. That might be a sailor's tale, but … even devils can swallow sailor's tales, right?"

"So if you chose the right aboleth," Farideh said, "you could know anything."

"But you'd have to *get* to their memories," Brin said. "And they're too powerful. They look like dumb beasts maybe, but you can't match their minds."

"You don't have to match their minds," Lorcan said. "You have to possess them." He ran his hands through his hair. "And then you can also control them. You can make them consume anyone you like. Anyone they could best."

"No," Brin said. "They're too powerful—"

"As powerful as a princess of the Hells?" Lorcan snapped. "There are those who worship Glasya as a god. Regardless of what your Sovereignty can or cannot do to her, she will make them reconsider their supremacy."

It was plausible, Farideh thought. Though it seemed an awful lot of trouble … an awful lot of risk for something that might come to nothing at all. She shook her head. Maybe Lorcan was right. Maybe

it was foolhardy to puzzle out the motives of archdevils. Maybe Glasya was the reckless one.

His eyes met Farideh's. "Darling, you have to agree this is far over any of our heads. Archdevils and aboleths? What do you think to do against that?"

He was right, of course; she was not a match for an aboleth. Against Glasya's plans, she would be no more an obstacle than a pebble in the road.

"Nothing," she said. "But now we know better how to distract Rohini while we rescue Mehen."

"And even if you get to him, darling, she has him dominated. He won't come willingly. Better for you to think of him as dead."

"What your orc couldn't do?" she said bitterly. His eyes hardened. "We're going back for Mehen."

"Fine," he said. "Break your own heart. Go see Mehen's not coming back. But don't try to stop Glasya's plans. I beg you. You cannot stand against her. None of you can."

"Can *you?*" Havilar asked.

"I'm not stupid enough to try," he said. He scanned the street again. "What about the Ashmadai?" Farideh said.

Lorcan gave another of those hopeless sounding laughs. "Avoid them too."

"They thought the Glasyans were after them. Is that Rohini's doing?"

"Why are you trying to puzzle all of this out?" Lorcan cried. "There's nothing to be gained by knowing what the plans of archdevils are. It's only going to draw their eyes. We shouldn't even be *guessing* at what Rohini is tasked with."

"I'm trying to figure out what we should be doing before your fifty-eight half-sisters show up along with Rohini and her *karshoji*-possessed aboleths, and tear this city to the ground." She fought the urge to threaten him with the rod again. "*You're* the one who brought up Ashmadai before. You're the one who claimed we were in the middle of a Hellish civil war. You're the one demanding I get out of Neverwinter safely, so help me. Tell me what we're dealing with."

But Lorcan merely clamped his mouth shut and shook his head emphatically.

"Fine." Farideh turned her back to him. "We need to get back to the hall and to Mehen. Without running into any more devils."

"And we have to undo what Rohini's done to Mehen," Havilar added. She looked up at Lorcan. "Does he know how to do that?"

"We try things until they work," Farideh answered. "Starting with Brin's magic."

"No," Brin said. "I'm not strong enough … you need a more powerful priest than me."

"Luckily this place is *lousy* with priests," Havilar said. "Tam is somewhere here, isn't he?"

Farideh pursed her lips. "He said to meet him outside the South Gate. We don't have time to find him."

"You *have* to," Brin said. "Unless you have powerful potions up your sleeves?"

"A present from your lousy priest?" Lorcan muttered.

"What sort of potions?" Farideh asked. "A potion of vitality? Would that do it?"

"Well … yes," Brin said. He squinted at her. "Where did you get a potion of vitality?"

"I don't have one," Farideh said. "But Yvon did. There's one on the shelf of the shop."

"The Ashmadai place?" Havilar said.

Lorcan snorted. "How terribly safe."

Farideh ignored him. "It'll be fine. They're all dead, remember?"

"Not by a long shot."

Farideh glared at Lorcan. "I'm sorry, I thought you didn't want to puzzle this out. Have you got something to add?"

He regarded her a long moment, as if he did, as if he wanted to spell out what she was missing. But he turned resolutely to the window. "Don't say you're sorry when you're not."

"What do you mean they aren't all dead?" Havilar demanded. "Farideh said we killed them all."

Lorcan paused, as if he didn't want to say. "The Ashmadai are as numerous as termites in Neverwinter. And now they're angry. If

Rohini left even one alive, scads of them are now looking for the two of you."

Farideh cursed. Why did Lorcan always have to be right? Aboleths and cultists of Asmodeus, and devils serving Glasya—you're being stubborn if you stay here, she thought. Nothing but stubborn.

"Fine," Farideh said. "We need one to go get the potion and one to get Mehen out of the temple. Brin, you're the one the Ashmadai haven't seen. You break into the shop." She looked at Havilar and bit her lip. The worst of her shock had subsided, but she was still looking drawn and nervous. Farideh couldn't ask Havilar to come anywhere near Rohini, not if the succubus might possess her again.

"Can you go with him?" she asked. "He'll need someone to guard him."

Havilar nodded once. "And I'm fast," she said, half to herself. "I can get there quick and be back to meet you—"

"No," Farideh said. "We meet by the gate. If something happens, you can't be caught." She hesitated a moment and turned to Brin. "Keep up if you can, heal her if the bandage doesn't hold. I'll bring Mehen to you."

Brin glanced up at Lorcan. "Is he going with you?"

"No," Farideh said, just as Lorcan answered, "Yes."

"*No,*" she said again, "you aren't."

"Rohini must have a portal to the Hells. She couldn't travel back and forth without one. Since my … path, is clearly not working, I might as well come with you and find hers." He smirked. "It's just convenient."

"Or we could kill you," Havilar piped. "That would send you back."

He glowered. "That doesn't work on *half*-devils."

"Havi, go," Farideh said. "We don't have much time. Brin, go with her. Keep your eyes open. If you run into Ashmadai—"

"Yes, Mehen," Havilar said, sliding into her glaive's harness. "We'll be careful."

Words caught in Farideh's mouth—she wanted to warn Havilar, to snap at her for being flippant, to tell her she loved her dearly in

case something happened. To say she was sorry for everything that had brought them here. There wasn't time. She hugged her twin tight. "Be careful."

"I'll try," Havilar said, squeezing her back. "You be careful, too. You don't need me to tell you, worrywart, but do it anyway." Farideh chuckled.

She made a point of hugging Brin as well, stiff and awkward as it felt. "Don't let her fight any cultists," she murmured. "Please."

"I'll try," he said.

Havilar eyed Lorcan a moment before giving Farideh one last, significant look—a reminder that being careful extended to the cambion—and heading down the wall with Brin following.

You *will* see her again, she told herself. It made the lump in her throat harder to swallow. Farideh looked back over her shoulder at Lorcan, who was still giving her a petulant, puzzled sort of stare.

"What in all the planes were you doing in an Ashmadai safe-house?" he asked quietly.

"Finding a way out of this pact."

His eyes tightened, and he folded his arms over his chest. "How clever of you. No better way to the peaks of the Hells than clinging to the god of sin's most brutal followers."

"Fortunately I have other options," she said, ignoring the insult. "If you're going to follow me, you ought to put your disguise back on."

"You *do* make a much better tyrant than a killer."

"Put it on, or don't follow me," she said. She turned from him, her anger getting the better of her. "Gods, I can't believe all this time you could make yourself look human. It was just too much fun popping up and putting me in danger, wasn't it?"

"You *may* have noticed earlier," he said bitterly, "the spell causes a great deal of pain. I save it for emergencies. Like rescuing you."

"You mean 'trying to drag me out of where you couldn't get me'?"

"You ripped me out of my disguise and into my proper skin. I think we're even on that score."

She spun on him. “I used the amulet to protect myself from you! You don’t get *credit* for that.”

“An enormous waste of its powers,” he said tightly. “I’d never hurt you like Rohini will.”

She couldn’t deny Rohini’s danger—but that didn’t mean Lorcan wasn’t dangerous himself. The amulet wouldn’t have done anything if he weren’t. She pulled herself straight and stared him down. “You hurt me enough.”

He stepped closer, and her pulse sped. “And I save you plenty. I could still get you out of here. You know I’m right—you are not a match for archdevils and aboleths.”

“Maybe I’m not,” she said. “But I’m not a coward.” She walked away. “Besides,” she said, reaching for the handholds in the broken wall, “you don’t have your portal.”

He grabbed her arm. “I could fly. Carry you out of here. I could fly you to the House of Knowledge if you’re really set on this mad plan.”

Whipping through the cool rain, dozens of feet above the slick roofs of the city, the cobbled roads, with only Lorcan to keep her from falling—Farideh shuddered. He’d go where he wanted and she’d be stuck, clinging to his neck.

“Take your hand off me before the amulet makes you.” She climbed down the wall to the lower level. If he was going to be difficult, that was not her problem at all. Much as she found herself hoping Lorcan would help, she knew perfectly well it wasn’t in his nature. Changing Lorcan would be as impossible as saving him. Let it go, she told herself as she clambered over the ancient lava flow.

He dropped through the open stairwell and landed in front of her, holding up a hand to ease her down. She didn’t take it.

“You trust me enough to hear your plans when I could easily go over to Rohini,” he said. “I think you don’t really care how it turns out, you just want to be seen to make the effort. And who would blame you? Mehen never appreciated all you were. He shouldn’t be surprised if you leave him to his fate.”

She bore it, only watching the cracks in his facade. Something had changed. It was so much like Havi, upset and not sure why she was

upset—only lashing out because it wasn't coming clear. Waiting for Farideh to puzzle it out.

"I don't have time to coddle you," she said after a moment. "So help me, or go to Rohini—whatever your plans are."

"Fine!" he snapped. "But don't blame me when you end up dead!"

"You're afraid, aren't you? You're afraid you won't make it home alive."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It doesn't make you a coward. We're all—"

"I am *not* a coward!" he seethed. "And how dare you imply it, after I defended you from my sisters, rescued you from Sairché, without as much as a 'many thanks' from you."

"Many thanks," she said. But still he had that uncomfortable, frustrated look. He flexed his wings in a fidgety way, but wouldn't say any more. After a moment, Farideh left the building. Lorcan could fix himself.

But in short order he was beside her again.

"You could have let that sword fall," he said. "I know you were thinking of letting it."

"I didn't want you to die," she said, growing annoyed. "And besides, you did the same thing as me—pushing me away like that, telling me to run. If saving you is such a slight, then you were just as bad."

"That's not the same!"

"It's exactly the same. You would have died."

"I would have died anyway—they wanted to kill me, you stupid girl. *You* could have run and escaped their notice!"

"And you could have flown away and found some other heir!" she shouted. "But you didn't!"

"I …" Lorcan trailed off, surprised, and Farideh realized he hadn't been baiting her: it had not occurred to him to flee. The clearest, simplest action—the one thing selfish Lorcan should have found obvious to his very core—and he hadn't done it. Because he'd been afraid that *she* would be hurt.

She wasn't just a piece in his collection, and he didn't know what to do with that. Suddenly she couldn't quite look at him.

“Or maybe I wanted you to owe me,” she said, though it was a lie, though it was in no way what she would have done, though it made no sense even if she had done it. It was less complicated than what threatened to be true. “And now you do. So you’ll help me face Rohini?” she asked, turning the topic.

But Lorcan was still agitated. “Darling, she is going to *kill* you!” he said with sudden earnestness. He took her arms—gently; the amulet didn’t react. Farideh wondered if it could tell at all what was dangerous and what was safe. “What do I have to say to get you to understand that? You will be *dead,* and there is nothing I can do to fix that. *Nothing.*” He let her go. “Even your little paladin isn’t going to be able to save you.”

There, that was the Lorcan she knew. That raw moment might never have happened, and they might go back to what they always were: her sword, his treasure. “If you don’t want to lose your set, you should help me.”

For the barest of seconds, she thought he might storm off. She turned to walk away, only to find herself scooped up in Lorcan’s arms, and vaulting into the empty air. His wings flapped heavily, gusting the air around him as he sought the new balance of their combined weight. Farideh glanced down once, at the street below and the buildings growing smaller and smaller. Her stomach turned and she wrapped her arms around Lorcan’s neck tight enough to choke him and shut her eyes.

“Now,” he said firmly, “I don’t owe you anything.”

Sairché sat in a dark corner and listened to the garrulous mortals arguing the same points over and over again. For the most part, the Ashmadai didn’t possess secrets worth hearing. She fought the urge to sigh and listened as a warty little man with watery eyes again ran down the list of cultists who had *not* come to their impromptu meeting, the interminable planning session that would lead to revenge.

By the look of things, most of the Ashmadai were just as antsy as Sairché.

"An insult this great," the warty little man said in a smooth, slippery voice, "is an insult to us all, and worse, an insult to Asmodeus himself."

Sairché rolled her eyes. One tended to live a great deal longer if one didn't attempt to put motives in the king of the Hells's mouth.

"Simply listen," Glasya said. "Make certain they are coming to amenable conclusions. If they do not, feel free to guide them."

Sairché was prepared to, but once they were past the point of laying blame on their absent comrades, the assembled Ashmadai spat out information and cobbled it together more quickly than Sairché would have ever given mortals credit for:

The shadow devil had blamed "the Sovereignty." The Sovereignty was spoken of on the Sea of Fallen Stars. It was a sailors' tale. It was a true and terrible threat. It was the ruler of the creatures of the sea and spellplague. It was the origin of all madness.

They strung rumors together like pearls on a necklace—the nightmares of the Chasm, the hospital that ministered to spellscarred soldiers and the secret experiments everyone knew were carried out there, the smug priest who ran things, the visits he paid to a certain peculiar gentleman who lived on the edge of the river. The *Abolethic* Sovereignty. The fearsome aboleths. The Chasm's monsters, and the strange way they all mimicked one another—the lashing tentacles, the poisonous slime, the reminders of the nightmares everyone knew came with proximity to the Chasm—and didn't, as if a mad sculptor built them one by one, the Ashmadai mused. As if something was crafting and sending them out. It would be easy, and clever too, to send them out in the guise of the Ashmadai's known enemies, to harry and winnow them while they in turn harried and winnowed the ranks of other cults. They thought they were clever, these aboleths—well they had not yet met the followers of the Raging Fiend.

As Sairché watched the Ashmadai circling up for the sacrifice that would call up Asmodeus's emissary to pass along the information of

this new and eldritch threat, her mouth pulled down in a frown of puzzlement.

Sairché knew, as well as anyone knew, that getting too clever around the schemes of an archdevil could easily lead to an early death. Or worse. But as she watched the Ashmadai pin down a struggling half-elf woman, she couldn't help but wonder at Glasya's intentions. She'd gleaned from listening to Invadiah and Rohini that Rohini's mission was to infiltrate the Sovereignty and get Invadiah access to an aboleth. Sairché had assumed that Glasya wanted to capture one of the interplanar monsters for one reason or another, and didn't wonder too hard about why.

But the archduchess had sent Sairché *not* to lure the Sovereignty, *not* to redirect the Ashmadai away from her agents, but to drive them toward Rohini, *thinking* they were fighting the Sovereignty.

It was almost as if the aboleths had nothing at all to do with any of Glasya's Neverwinter plans.

The woman's screams broke her concentration and she settled back to watch the rest of the sacrifice. Glasya would want to know if they were successful at passing on this new theory.

Yvon stirred close to consciousness several times. He heard the voices of strangers, saw limbs strewn across his field of view, and once heard Lector's strident tones, diminished by fatigue or something like it. When he finally broke free and woke from his fitful half-sleep, he sat up and found himself covered over with several stiff bodies. Sekata looked down at him, her chest a ruin and a fly walking over the surface of her eye.

Yvon pushed her body off in a sudden panic and hauled himself dizzily to his feet. The room was littered with bodies and splattered with blood and smears of char where spells had broken over the timbers and brick. His own gut was throbbing in pain, and as he touched his abdomen he found it bloodied and feverishly hot. Still disoriented he fished in his pockets for a small pouch and withdrew a potion—a sample of Sekata's wares—downing it in one gulp. The

wound flared for a moment, then subsided, still there, but no longer a death sentence. He tore lengths of cloth from another fellow's robes to make a bandage.

Then he remembered the twins.

He froze, looking around the room, but all was still and silent. If they were still here, they weren't ready to attack. He crept carefully over the fallen bodies, noting faces. So many….

In the middle of the floor lay a chain and a small silver amulet. Lector's paralysis charm. Yvon's shaking, bloodstained fingers scooped the valuable necklace up. Valuable, he thought, but it did Lector no favors. It was what came of putting your faith in breakable things. He crept slowly up the stairs, favoring his wound.

Kalam—poor boy—had been laid out beside the entrance and covered over with a sheet. A new man, a tiefling with broad shoulders and heavy horns, sat on a stool beside him, sharpening a short curved blade.

"You," Yvon said, his voice rasping. The guard jumped, nearly taking off a thumb. "You there."

"Hells, are you alive?" The guard was on his feet and ushering Yvon toward the door and fresh air. "Your pardon," he said. "It seemed like no one down there was still breathing."

The rush of cool, damp air was a welcome change from the bloody stink of the cellar. "They're all dead?"

"Don't worry, brother," the tiefling man said. "The others are gathering—we will have revenge on those that killed your friends."

Yvon's eyes swam. "The Glasyans?"

The man gave him a puzzled look. "The Sovereignty." He lowered his voice. "They think they are clever, but we've discovered them after all: the spirits living in the Chasm. They think to overthrow our lord, no doubt."

"No," Yvon said. "It was a pair of Glasyans. It was the Sixth Layer."

The man snorted. "Those dandies? We had it from your leader's mouth: four spellscarred orcs and a tiefling warlock claiming the blood of Ashmadai for the Sovereignty."

“Lector?” In his mind’s eye, Yvon recalled the the crunch of bone, the empty wheeze of breath leaving his comrade’s body. The golden-eyed one had broken something in his skull with that strike. His eyes had been dead before he hit the floor … hadn’t they? “Where is he?”

The guard shook his head. “Gave his report and then died, unfortunately. As you will soon if you don’t give those wounds a rest.”

“There were no orcs,” Yvon said. “The orcs … those were earlier. Elsewhere.”

The guard raised an eyebrow. “So you were all struck down by a single warlock?”

Yvon shook his head. “No. A pair of warlocks … or perhaps a warlock and something else.”

“Aye, there’s killing blows enough to mark at least a caster and a blademaster.” He shifted. “Or a warlock leading a pack of orcs.”

“The Raging Fiend take you!” Yvon cried. “I know what I saw.”

“Bring it to someone who cares, brother. Only wait until after the burning.” The guard grinned. “You marked, did you, the warlock wore the robes of the House of Knowledge?” He leaned down close to Yvon and whispered, “It burns tonight.”

Yvon stared at the man a moment, woozy with the loss of blood. None of this was right—the girl who entered had not spoken, she had come alone, but Farideh had aided her and they had killed ten Ashmadai with their own hands and nearly killed Yvon as well. There were no orcs. There was no claim of any “Sovereignty.”

And now his fellow cultists were coming together to punish … who? Yvon had noted the connection between the Sixth Layer cult and the hospitalers of the House of Knowledge. But burning down the entire temple—one of the largest buildings still standing in Neverwinter—to kill two girls … that was too much. It would draw the notice of every eye in Neverwinter, and news would spread far and wide. Much as he was sorry to agree with poor, dead Sekata, it did not benefit the Ashmadai to unmask themselves so abruptly.

Especially without determining if the girls were even within.

The guard peeked out the doorway. “Ah, there we are. That’s the signal. I’m afraid it’s time to go.”

“Go?” Yvon said. “Where?”

“Anyplace but here,” the guard said. “This many bodies, Mordai Vell wants the building burned to the ground. The guard’s been paid off and the streets are cleared. Time to get the bier going.”

Yvon stumbled out into the rain and watched as the guard and his signaler splashed accelerant on the walls of his shop. The fire went up quick and hotter than he would have imagined with the rain coming down. The guard again urged him to leave, but when Yvon wouldn’t move, he cursed and went on his way.

The fire roared higher, consuming Yvon’s life, his friends, his comrades. He listened to the sounds of bottles exploding with the heat and passed Lector’s amulet from palm to palm. This wasn’t how the faithful of the Raging Fiend were meant to fall.

“Give me the strength to strike down Your enemies,” Yvon murmured, though Asmodeus was not known for such charity. “Give me the insight to hunt them to the ground.”

The sign caught with a great *whoosh* of flames, swallowing up the secret sigil of the Ashmadai. Inauspicious, he thought.

But as Yvon stood, his joints aching from cold and blood loss, the smack of running feet approached. Yvon watched, stunned, as the runner barreled past him, stopping short of the flames: it was the golden-eyed tiefling, Farideh’s sister, the one who’d murdered them all.

“You are most gracious, Lord,” Yvon said, and he swore her sacrifice would be drawn out even longer than the orc’s.

I am going to fix this, Havilar thought as she ran down the street, outpacing Brin by blocks at a time. She slowed and watched him catch her up, bouncing with nervous energy.

She would get the potion for Mehen. She would show Brin she wasn’t a coward and prove to Farideh she *wasn’t* the delicate one. She’d stop getting the horrible bursts of panic that kept surging up

into her chest, and nobody would possess her or tamper with her again. They'd get out of this awful city and things would go back to the way they were. The way they were supposed to be.

Brin caught up to her and she started running again. Everything can go back to the way it was, she told herself again. I am going to fix this. She spotted the turn that led to the shop.

"Havi!" Brin shouted. She'd gotten ahead of him again.

"This way," she called, and she headed up the street. She'd get the potion and *karshoj* to those Ashmadai. She wasn't afraid.

She passed several people running in the opposite direction. The street was getting much brighter, as if a bonfire…. She slowed and stopped.

Where the shop had been, a giant fire blazed.

Havilar stood, staring at the inferno, fighting down her alarm. If she couldn't get the potion, then she couldn't save Mehen, and everything was still a mess. She watched the flames. A little wouldn't hurt her, maybe if she—

A sudden sharp pain caught her across the base of her throat, yanking her off her feet.

She got her fingers around the garrote as she slipped, and she pulled hard. The wire cut her fingers, but the shorter person holding it slammed into her back. She twisted, bringing her elbow hard into his ribs and nearly hitting his throat instead. He coughed and his grip on the wire loosened enough for Havilar to roll free.

The shopkeeper they'd met on their first day in Neverwinter came to his feet a little unsteadily. He had a mad look in his eye and dried blood all down his crimson robes. He shoved the garrote into his pocket and drew a black-handled dagger instead. "Blessings of the Raging Fiend upon you."

"Oh," she said, feeling that peculiar panic start to smother her nerves. "You're one of those cultists."

"Foremost," the shopkeeper said. "The one you couldn't kill."

"That wasn't me." She reached back slowly to unhook her glaive from its harness. "You have the wrong one."

"I have the blessing of Asmodeus himself," the shopkeeper said. "I recognize you. I remember now—the eyes." He tapped the tip of his

dagger below one eye. “Let’s see how well your armor suits you now.”

He dived at her blade-first. She gave up on her glaive and stepped toward him hands up to catch his wrist and stop the wicked blade. The sort of clumsy attack she’d learned to block when she still had her milk teeth, for heavens’ sakes. She started to turn his wrist under her, to throw him off his feet and break his grip on the blade, when his other hand ripped something else out of his pocket and something small and cold and metal pressed against her neck.

“*Maollis.*”

The air went out of her. All the muscles of her arms and legs went loose. Havilar landed flat on her back, staring up at the cloudy sky, her body from tip to toe screaming in pain. She could not even fight the shopkeeper off as he wound cords around her wrists and ankles and bound her with complex loops around the hips and shoulders. As the spell started to fade, he shoved a rag in her mouth and bound that there too.

“That’s more appropriate,” he said, wiping the dagger on his filthy robes. He grabbed hold of the ropes.

“You have them quite fooled,” the shopkeeper panted. “Quite fooled indeed. They’ve gone right after your ‘Sovereignty.’ ” He jerked the rope, dragging Havilar another few feet. “But not me. I don’t know how you did it, but it didn’t work on me, Glasyan. I know it was you. I know it was your mistress’s orders.

“And all the world will know exactly that, once I’ve cut you into pieces and siphoned off your soul for the Raging Fiend himself. In front of everyone as they prepare to march on that hospital—oh yes! We’ve figured your confederates out! They’ll see it is all the Sixth Layer’s plot.” He trailed off in a mad sort of giggle.

Havilar spied Brin, sword drawn, his eyes darting from Havilar to the shopkeeper as if gauging the danger. For once, Havilar nearly blessed his caution—if the bald man had gotten the better of her with that stupid amulet, he’d surely take Brin down too if he wasn’t careful.

He might take Brin regardless, and then no one would know where she was.

She blinked at him, and rolled her head back the way they'd come—he needed to get help. If the shopkeeper wasn't a complete fool he'd keep her tied up the entire time he…. The thought made her momentarily dizzy.

Brin either caught her meaning or came to the same conclusion. Though he looked reluctant to leave her to the shopkeeper, he faded back into the shadows to make a different route, leaving Havilar to try her best not to panic.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE BLADE OF THE GODS WILL SEVER THE CORD OF THE MOON SHIT, bloody shit!" Rohini strained against the bindings that held her to the heavy chair and the curling madness that held tight to her mind. Arrayed around her, Vartan, the quartet of spellscarred orcs, and a trio of abolethic servitors dripping clear slime watched her.

"Why did you come?" they asked, again and again. "Why did you seek us out?"

The questions were more puzzled than angry, as if they only wanted her to see the error of her ways. She wondered why they hadn't just fed her to the aboleths in the Chasm, but as soon as she thought it, the corruption agent in her set her giggling. She was a useful tool after all—the Sovereignty knew so, the Hells knew so.

"You piss-swilling apes can *the last of the anchors hides in the city of crowns, and the shadow will extinguish the light therein.*" Rohini screeched in frustration.

Give in, the part of her swallowed by the corrupting light crooned. The voices, the prophetic words, the abrupt changes to her senses—at some point after the contents of the cask had overwhelmed her, Rohini had lost control long enough for Vartan to tie her to the chair and fetch these servitors.

Rohini made her shape shift in subtle ways, gave herself limpid eyes and heaving breasts. She looked up at Vartan, her lower lip trembling.

But he was too far gone to be such an easy target. He regarded her as a trophy now, or a curiosity. Something for the Sovereignty to claim dominion over. Just like him.

With a roar of rage, Rohini's shape flowed again into a hulking bugbear's, straining against the bindings. Vartan stepped back, but the servitors merely watched her.

"Why did you come, devil?" one asked. "Why have you aided this one?"

"What benefits us, benefits Asmodeus." She sneered. "And what benefits Asmodeus *the daughter will claim*—" She shut her mouth resolutely against the bubbling prophecy. Better they kill her than know her mission.

They'll know soon enough, the crooning voice said. Embrace it. After all, Glasya isn't here to save you. She doesn't care what happens to you now.

"Her plan was always that I died in the process," she said aloud, startling herself.

"The process of what?" Vartan asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she said. She threw her head backward against the chair, studying the ceiling as if the lines of the stone and the ancient stains left behind by collecting water, persisting beyond the shifting colors that clouded her vision, would anchor her. She had to find a way out.

She locked her eyes on one particular stain—the size and shape of a grown man's liver—and smiled. She knew this room—and what lay near it.

She lowered her head and with all her effort hurled her charm like a net over Vartan. He stilled, sensing the change and not understanding it. Good, she thought, ignoring the splintering lights that filled her vision. "I'll tell you all about it, if you do something for me."

"Of course," he said.

She nodded at the back of the room. "Open the door."

Vartan started to do as she bid. One of the servitors, a tall, lanky man, caught him by the wrist. "That is unwise."

But Rohini's charm held firm, and Vartan shook off the servitor and pulled open the door.

"Mehen!" Rohini screamed. "Mehen, help!"

The dragonborn was faster than she'd expected, and more agile, despite her magic dragging against his reserves for the past two days. Clever her for leaving him his weapons—the wide blade that hacked at the orc nearest the door and sent a slash of blood and slime spraying across the stone. The servitors were quicker and avoided the dragonborn's next swing.

The tall, lanky man drove his shoulder hard, as if his body didn't matter, into Mehen's lower back. It didn't fell the dragonborn, but it took his attention and gave the other servitor a chance to pull his blade.

And Rohini a chance to escape. Her flesh shifted again, dwindled, as the bones of her arms tapered into the thin limbs of a young elf girl. She wriggled out of the restraints and worked her feet free of the manacles, only stripping the first layer of her skin away, the blood making it easier to slip free. She didn't feel anything except a rush of glee as she retook her own form, the madness curling itself around her mind.

"Stop him," one of the servitors said.

"Stop," Rohini repeated, her tongue turned traitor. Mehen froze, his sword raised over the servitor now lying on the floor. The corruption settled on her mind in an uneasy truce.

"Your resources are impressive," the wounded servitor said.

"I can bring him to bear again," she said. "Him and more."

"We are pleased to hear it," the other said. "It is a skill we covet dearly."

"You think to convert me as you did Anthus," she said.

"After a fashion," the servitor said mildly. "We had thought Brother Anthus would suit, but in the end he proved himself less ideal than we had previously assumed. You are much preferable. For one, you have resisted the powers of the Hex Locus like no other has. You are too willful to be a singer, and we are pleased to have found you."

They sounded like the sort of things she found herself blurting out. The strange phrases were bubbling up in her thoughts again, and Rohini clenched her jaw until they subsided, her tongue flicking

around her mouth trying to shape the words. “What are you talking about?” she said once she was sure she could say it.

“You are the Prophet,” the servitor said, bowing. “You are the one who will gather the Choir, to sing the Symphony of Madness into being.”

Rohini wavered, the blur of the corruption surging through her, twisting her thoughts into a sort of pleasure at the opportunity. She could spoil a hundred Anthuses and Vartans with the power of the Sovereignty, it told her. You can bring Arunika back from the grave tomorrow. Power like she could never gain in the Hells. Power to unmake those who’d treated her as if she were disposable.

Rohini laughed, a high, mad sound. “You want me to trade one master for another and thank you for it. Fool.”

The servitor smiled. “It is too late for that. The Hex Locus has blessed you. The mark of the Far Realm is on you. You have already been granted a new master.”

“It does not mean I will serve.”

“It is your nature to serve,” the servitor said. “It is in all of our natures. But put yourself in the yoke of the Sovereignty and we promise you a longer lead than that of the Hells. You will be a queen.”

“Among slaves,” Rohini snarled.

The servitor shrugged, almost beatifically, his slimy palms turned up. “Is that not better than what you have now, devil? We are not privy to the current state of the Nine Hells, but our masters know what your kind gave up. Is it worth it, Asmodeus’s bridle? Your former enemies now your mistresses, your reward the dissolution of your true form?” The servitor stepped toward her. “If you tell us who sent you, and why you are here, we can help you destroy them.”

Arunika would have relished such an offer, the voice reminded her, and not so long ago, Rohini would have relished it too—they’d been raised from the cradle to corrupt and undo. The murmuring of the Hex Locus’s infection sang to her of the unparalleled pleasures of careful unmaking, of bringing down such complex schemes as the one she now lay tangled in. To hand over Glasya and Invadiah when

they least expected it—the demon in her would have reveled in their falls.

The servitor was watching her expectantly.

I am not Arunika, she thought.

"What benefits Asmodeus, benefits us all," she said again, as the prophecy bubbled up to her lips once more. Even though it wasn't true in the least.



Sairché crept through her mother's apartments to the treasure room and slipped inside. Someone had sliced the damaged door away and cleared the rubble of the Needle of the Crossroads. The faintest shadow of its interwoven spells still disturbed the air—otherwise not a pebble remained.

She slid the ring she'd shaped and enchanted from one of the iron curls of the scrying mirror's frame onto her finger. Not a piece she'd wear to court, but it did the job. As she waved it before the mirror, the surface shimmered, hiccupped, then solidified on the temple of Oghma, the House of Knowledge in Neverwinter. And did not move.

Sairché cursed. She'd spent good, long hours adding to the mirror's spells, pouring holy water with heavily gloved hands and painting monstrous bloods onto the mirror with a stolen angel's feather, for *just* such an occasion. It should have circumvented its previous limitations. She seized the frame and shook it on its hook. Still nothing.

"Piece of rubbish." She pursed her lips. Fine. Rohini could have her privacy a little longer. She'd warm the mirror up to breaking through the temple's protections. Spy on someone less interesting and easier to get at.

Sairché waved the ring again and bade the mirror show her Aornos. The mirror swirled and formed an empty street under a dark, drizzling sky. Neverwinter again. But there was no sign of red-haired Aornos. Sairché peered at the image, but as she did, the image blurred and wavered and reformed into the plains of

Malbolge. Into the Birthing Pit, where the damned became devils and the devils killed out in the world incubated.

Sairché raised her eyebrows, and felt a small smile sneaking its way across her lips. “Oh no.”

She pressed the mirror to find Nemea, and again it showed her the same twitching images that settled, resolutely, on the boiling pit of souls. No doubting its message: Nemea and Aornos were dead.

Had Aornos and Nemea been stupid enough to pick a fight with Glasya’s hellwasps? Sairché shook her head sadly at the bubbling pit. Why did she even ask? Poor stupid Nemea. Poor stupid Aornos. They were exactly the sort to take Invadiah’s rage as an exhortation to kill the hellwasps.

With luck they would emerge as erinyes once more, though Sairché doubted their luck was that good. If *Sairché* was lucky, they wouldn’t remember her at all when they were reborn.

Hellwasps, she ordered the mirror. It snapped but flowed more smoothly, forming a window into Glasya’s audience chamber, where the hive of hellwasps swooped and swarmed around the throne of their chosen queen. Sairché frowned.

The ring, she remembered, and directed the mirror to find the hellwasp which carried the green stone ring in its mouth. The mirror’s surface dissolved into wavering light, as if the request were too difficult to manage, but then, abruptly, it cleared to show another rainy street. Then the Birthing Pit. Sairché’s eyebrows went up again.

As if for good measure, the mirror changed to the street again, then a wide, ancient wall, under the same drizzling sky. Nestled in a crack in the poorly repaired mortar sat the green stone ring—the second hellwasp must have snatched it up when the first was destroyed. Organized little beasties, Sairché thought. She would have liked a swarm of her own.

But then the mirror shimmered again and returned to the pit.

Sairché took a step back from the mirror. Both hellwasps dead. Both erinyes dead.

Lorcan, she ordered the mirror, her throat tightening. Show me Lorcan.

The mirror moved smoothly this time, but when it stopped, it showed her Lorcan launching up from a city street, a woman clinging to his neck as he took to the air. She peered at the woman—the Brimstone Angel.

Sairché grinned. Not one part of Invadiah's retaliation had come out right.

She stirred the scrying mirror once more, and this time her adaptations worked. The mirror parted the temple's forbiddances and obliged her—for only scant seconds, but still—with a glimpse of how Rohini's end of the plan was going.

Rohini stood, exposed, unglamored, traces of tainted blue magic squirming over her dusky skin. She swayed on her feet like a drunk. Four people stood arrayed around her—a dragonborn and a man she had clearly charmed, and two empty-eyed, slime-skinned slaves of the aboleths. There was no question that they knew what she was. There was no question, in Sairché's view, that Rohini was under their control.

Delicious, she thought again. And Invadiah was out on her training field without an inkling that everything was falling apart. Heads were going to roll this time. Starting with Rohini or with Lorcan? she wondered.

Starting with the messenger, she thought grimly. Sairché wet her lips, and racked her brain for a devil who was foolish enough or desperate enough or indebted enough to deliver such a message to Invadiah. If she wrote it down, they didn't have to know the contents….

Or, she thought, perhaps *not* Invadiah.

The Neverwinter mission, after all, was a disaster, and such disasters led to dramatic shifts of power. If Sairché played her hand right, she could gain some of that power. She had Glasya's ear, after all. Invadiah would call her traitor, but that wouldn't matter if Invadiah fell.

Both, she decided. She would find a stupid imp to carry her message to Invadiah and then find a way to get an audience with the archduchess.

Because regardless of whether Glasya thought Invadiah had ruined things right now, things would start to crumble when Invadiah inevitably went blazing into Neverwinter.



The moment Lorcan's feet were solidly on the ground, Farideh untangled herself from him, falling to her knees as if to reassure herself the ground was solid beneath her. Lorcan unwound her tail from his knee where it had wrapped itself.

"You know," he said, "most people literally dream of flying." He helped her to her feet, still smirking. "I rather enjoyed it."

She swatted him away. "Never again," she vowed. But at least he had gotten them there quicker than the streets would have, and far ahead of the Ashmadai. "Thank you," she added. She pulled the rod from her belt and scanned the empty courtyard. "Where's your portal?"

He drew his sword and wand, ignoring her question. "You'd do well to get that sword out," he said pointedly. "Who knows what's waiting for us."

"Acolytes," she said, "who will panic when they see you with a bare sword. Show me where you left Mehen at least."

They crept through the dim corridors, Lorcan leading the way. Farideh's heart was in her throat, and at every turn, she expected to find herself facing one of the acolytes or new-marked Brother Vartan or Rohini herself.

"You do know," Lorcan murmured, "that if Mehen doesn't break free of his domination, you're going to have to break it for him."

Farideh nodded. "I'll just tell him Havilar's in trouble."

"No," Lorcan said, "I mean I hope you've learned enough about swordwork from him because you're going to have to subdue him, and I'd rather you didn't get hit with that cleaver of his." He glanced back at her. "Still certain you don't want to come with me?"

Farideh bristled at that. "If I'm killed, you can always go make a pact with Havilar. Get yourself a Kakistos heir who knows her

bladework."

Lorcan muttered a curse under his breath. "Look, don't start this now. You … *I'm* going to get upset and you don't want me to get us both killed by doing something like shouting at you not to be so stupid as to listen to bloody Sairché." He started moving again. "I hope you are not such a fool as to believe she has your best interests at heart."

"And you do?"

He spun on her again. "No," he said. "But your interests are closer to mine than any other devil in the Hells. I guarantee you there is not a one among them willing to venture into a shitting temple to help you rescue a man that hates him above all others."

She returned his glare. "What were you going to do with Havilar? She's just as valuable."

For a long tense moment, Lorcan didn't speak. His mouth twitched as if he were choking on the words, and a muscle in his jaw pulsed as he bit down on them.

"You want to talk about this, fine," he finally said. "We will. Not now. She's safe," he added. "Nobody knows there are two of you. No one's going to find her."

Off the main hall, Lorcan turned down the corridor that led to the acolytes' quarters and abruptly stopped. Lying half out of the open door on their left, the body of an orc scintillating with blue fire blocked the path.

Lorcan reached back to press Farideh against the wall, but she'd dropped low, out of the eye line of anyone in the doorway. She crept forward, ever so slowly, until she could see the form of Brother Vartan standing near the door. Beyond him there were more of the spellscarred orcs and two men whose skin glistened in the torchlight. One stood to the side holding a wooden box. The bodies of another orc and one of the men lay on the ground. Beyond them stood Mehen, holding his falchion and rocking on his feet. Beyond Mehen, standing on a chair with her wings spread as if she could fly from the small room, was Rohini.

The succubus looked only vaguely like the hospitaler she'd portrayed before. If Farideh had not been told what to expect, she

would never have put the proper name to the creature. Aside from the vibrant red hair, the only thing Rohini had in common with her former mask was the inexorable air of competence—Rohini the hospitaler seemed like she could cure anything. Rohini the succubus could easily bring anyone down.

The succubus twitched, a scatter of blue lightning racing over her bronze skin. "*In the space between twilights the favored one will return* —you let me pass or I'll show you what you ought to fear!"

"If you accept it," the slimy man closest to her said, "it shall not hurt anymore."

"Mehen," she said, in a strained voice. "Kill them."

Rushing forward, Farideh tried to cry out, but Lorcan's hand covered her mouth. The amulet flared, and he muffled his own cry of pain against her hair.

Brother Vartan turned to look out the door, his face a mask. Lorcan held her tighter with one arm, and with the other grabbed hold of one of the charms pinned to his breastplate. A rush of cold air wrapped around them and Brother Vartan's eyes swept by.

"Hold still," Lorcan murmured, hardly speaking. "Mehen can take a few beatings. Let him thin that crowd out. Tymora smiles, he gets knocked out in the process."

Mehen's falchion was too large for the little room. He tossed it aside, well out of the reach of orcs or servitors, and pulled his ancient daggers instead. The nearest orc's spellscar bulged into ropey vines that streamed toward Mehen. The dragonborn dropped beneath them, darting out with one thin blade to pierce the orc's hamstring. But the blue tendrils plunged down after him and sank into the dragonborn's scales. Mehen did not cry out, but the blue magic crackled over his skin. It took a heart-stopping moment for Mehen to stand.

Farideh pried Lorcan's hand off. "We can't resurrect him if he's dead!" She fought against his hold. "And we can't *carry* him if he's unconscious!" She shoved Lorcan away, trying to break his grip on her.

"Mehen knows what he's doing."

But Farideh had watched Mehen's drill her entire life—this Mehen was slower, not caring if he left his guard open, not caring if his strikes brought him to a better counterattack. The only thing this Mehen did well was protect Rohini.

Farideh had to get him away from her.

"*Adaestuo!*"

The blast of energy struck Brother Vartan, hurling him back away from the doorway. Farideh shoved her elbow into Lorcan's chest and broke free of his grasp. She cast a second bolt into the room, into the cluster of orcs attacking Mehen. Whether due to luck or the frailty of the orcs from their transformation, the bolt exploded with a spray of blood, and one of them fell.

"You!" Rohini cried, the strange blue magic surging up through her unruly mane. She shuddered and looked for a moment as if she would fall from her perch. "You're supposed to be dead, *the dead will swarm the gates of the city of skulls.*" She broke into a string of infernal curses.

Farideh answered with a blast of fire. It washed over Rohini with no more effect than a gust of wind. But now eyes were on her—the slime-skinned men, the remaining two orcs … and Mehen. She took a step back, into another body, into hands that grabbed hold of her hair and pulled her backward. Brother Vartan's blank eyes looked down at her—

Lorcan struck Vartan hard with the pommel of his sword and the half-elf collapsed with a sickly crunch of bone. "Not fire," he ordered as she regained her balance. "We and she are of a type."

"And Lorcan," Rohini snarled. She spread her hands and flames built in them. The sickly light of a hundred colors suffused the fire, and Rohini's body gave a violent jerk. The flames exploded across the room, but what struck Farideh and Lorcan only singed them and didn't burn as hot. The unprotected orcs, the men, and Mehen on the other hand—their skin blistered and the hair on the orcs burned, sending up a stench like nothing Farideh had smelled before.

"The dead walk," Rohini said with a laugh. "Or were your sisters not up to the task?"

Lorcan smiled, a slow cunning grin. “Oh, they’ve failed all right. They were to meet me here—or didn’t they tell you?” He slashed at the encroaching orc. “I’ve been exonerated … and now they come for you, traitor.”

“Liar!” Rohini’s wings spread as if she would take off. “I have done all the archduchess has asked, all your bitch mother has ordered. I am no traitor.”

“You are no devil either.” Lorcan sneered. “Foulspawn demoness.”

Rohini shrieked in rage, and as if to underscore Lorcan’s insult, the scintillating magic crackled over her again: she was no longer simply a devil. Farideh felt the course of Hellish magic thrumming through Rohini, but the crackling light was something else, something stranger.

Farideh kept her rod high, ready to cast, but gods, she wished to run. Rohini was more dangerous than Lorcan, the orcs, Criella, the man from the inn, and the mad shopkeeper combined. Even maddened by that alien power, even clearly angry and beset on at least two sides, she was deadly. Farideh cast a bolt of fire toward the orcs—it burst outward and set fire to one of the slimy men.

You do not get to be a coward, she thought. Especially when Lorcan isn’t. She cast another bolt at Rohini.

“Deny it all you like,” she said, mimicking Lorcan’s cruel and haughty tones. “But it won’t save you from the erinyes’ blades.”

Rohini’s focus trained on her. “How *did* you escape that nest of Ashmadai, little mouse?”

Farideh smiled, though she felt sick under the succubus’s ruby gaze, and let the shadows curl around her as she drew her powers up to cast again. “Did you never suspect you were only leaving your mark on someone else’s dirty work? I was never meant to die.”

Rohini’s eyes widened at that, as if Farideh had struck her physically. She most definitely had all the succubus’s attention. Lorcan cast another bolt at Rohini, but when she recovered, she was still focused on Farideh.

“Mehen,” she said. The dragonborn froze, letting two of the orcs strike him while he awaited Rohini’s orders. She stepped down and

laid a hand on his shoulder, and a jolt of magic went through Mehen. “Kill the warlock. She’s ever so much trouble, don’t you think?”

Mehen’s yellow eyes were full of hatred. It’s not him, Farideh told herself, taking a step backward. It’s Rohini.

But it wasn’t only Rohini: it was Clanless Mehen, eyeing his daughter like a dire enemy. He curled his lip, baring his long sharp teeth.

“Yes,” he said. “Trouble.”

Stay calm, she told herself as Mehen scooped up his falchion. She edged toward the door, sparing a glance for Lorcan. He was still fighting back the orcs, and looked as if he’d like to strangle her. Rohini stalked toward her, following Mehen.

Farideh needed to slow her down. The slimy-skinned man holding the box hadn’t moved—had only watched as Farideh and Lorcan burst into the room. As Rohini drew near to him, Farideh pointed at the box.

“*Assulam!*” she cried. The box shattered into a cloud of splinters, forcing Rohini back with a shriek of surprise. Something bright and horrible burst free. Mehen didn’t notice. She turned to run, catching Lorcan’s eye. He could still find the portal if he ran now.

“Farideh!” he shouted after her.

Farideh led Mehen away from Rohini and hopefully into the safety of Neverwinter. As she bolted out the side doors and across the broken remains of the city so close to the Chasm, she wondered if it would be any sanctuary at all.



Rohini’s hands closed on the thing out of impulse, instinct. What her hands touched … there were no words in the languages of mortals. Only the secret parts of Rohini’s brain, the parts that still stoked a demon spark of madness, knew the words to describe what she held.

The Hex Locus froze her hands colder than the blessings of the chapel, colder than the blood of the Stygian general—but blisters erupted all over her palms and up her arms as if she held the sun itself. She was

screaming—she could feel her throat tearing and the power of the Hex Locus snaking down, down into her very core. Tendrils of magic seized her limbs, her neck, and squeezed as if to crush the life out of her. As if to bury themselves in her flesh. All she saw was blue as the heart of a glacier, blue as the heart of a flame. The Hex Locus's tendrils plunged into her eyes, into her nostrils, into her ears, all the while singing the maddening prophecy that already boiled her mind.

Her breath failed. Her lungs sucked into themselves. Her screams echoed into a thin, high vibration and the world swirled—shadows and blue magic fighting for supremacy.

Out of the depths of her dying vision, strange shapes swam closer. The same shapes, perhaps, she had glimpsed when the Hex Locus first insinuated itself into her thoughts. Monstrous shapes that dwarfed Rohini —even though, here, there was no Rohini. There might not even be a Rohini in Toril any longer.…

The creatures moved closer, great behemoths that swam through the nightmare ether she drowned in. Their tentacles encircled her. Their great ruby eyes pierced every layer of her being, through the artifice and the carefully crafted barriers, into what remained: ambition and the demon spark of madness.

The aboleths' thoughts tore through her like a hurricane wind, exposing that demon spark to the winds of the Far Realm. Coaxing a fire from her as the images of a world reformed, reborn into shifting, shapeless powers that would drive a lesser devil mad.

She had served madness. She had served ambition. She had served chaos and order and destruction and hierarchy. Now Rohini could serve this nameless entity that sought something unnameable which was all this and more.

Rohini returned to her bones and her breath, the sudden grossness, the abruptness more a violation than anything she had ever experienced. She did not belong in a succubus's skin … and she realized why.

The servitors stood quietly by, watching her stir. Vartan hovered over her, holding the bronze coffer she'd kept possets in. Only now … now Rohini was in it.

No—she fought to press that thought back into a more secure place. It wouldn't budge. She was in the box because the Hex Locus was in the

box. They were entwined now, united. Its song pulsed in her ears, demanding to be spoken, but when she hushed it, it coiled deeper, deep as the heartbeats in the bottom of the Chasm. Waiting.

She looked down at her arms, as if she could see the pulse there, throbbing in time with those of the creatures waiting in the Chasm, ready to be called forth.

"You live," the proxy said. "We were correct."

"You are the Prophet," the second servitor added, bowing. "You are the one who will gather the Choir, to sing the Symphony of Madness into being."

"I am Rohini," she said. The Hex Locus buzzed angrily and clenched its powers around her guts. "Your spell cannot change that, whatever it is."

"It is a fragment of the spellplague," the proxy said, "made solid and discrete. You held the blue fire."

She held it still, Rohini knew. The Hex Locus had chained itself to her very being. It thrummed in her blood and in her thoughts. Her secrets were its secrets now. Its powers were hers.

"Most impressive," the proxy added. "You ought to have died."

The girl. Rohini looked around. Farideh had burst the box somehow … with Glasya's magic, she had shattered it.

"Where did she go?" Rohini asked. "Where are the devil and the tiefling warlock?

"Your allies?" said the proxy who remained. "Why do you protect them? They have given you up for lost."

Rohini didn't answer. Her mind was reeling. Invadiah had said the erinyes would capture and kill Lorcan, and yet there he'd been. She had herself left the warlock girl to be torn apart by the Ashmadai. And yet there she'd stood, taunting Rohini.… She was the one who'd put the Hex Locus in Rohini's hands. Using Glasya's spells.

Invadiah lied, the voice of the Hex Locus said, and it sounded so like Arunika, taunting her. Glasya lied. You were meant to die.

"Not my allies," Rohini said. "Not anymore."

"Then prove your loyalty. Tell us why you came."

Rohini stared at the proxy, the half-formed words of prophecy fighting to break from her lips. She wanted to snarl, to tell him she was no slave

of his.

He would die soon. She could see it in the shifting patterns of the fabric of Toril. Her loyalty wouldn't matter in the end, and it would never matter to those behemoths in the shadows. She was a tool to them—and a tool's reasons for performing its task did not matter.

A desperate smile tugged at the corners of her lips. It sounded like something Arunika would say, were she not dead and waiting to be reborn under the thumb of the archdevils. The slithering monsters attuned to the Hex Locus's song, the things waiting in the Chasm—Rohini stared again at her wrists. Would it be so different to command the playthings of the aboleths instead of mortal fools?

You were meant to die, she reminded herself, and the voice in her thoughts might have been hers and it might have been the Hex Locus's and it might have been her dead sister's, but it was right. The Hells held no allies of hers. Not anymore.

"I served Glasya, princess of the Nine Hells, Archduchess of the Sixth Layer," Rohini said. "I answer to Exalted Invadiah, foremost of the erinyes of Malbolge. My orders were to infiltrate the servants of the Sovereignty through Brother Vartan and deliver an offer to your masters. She has in her possession an artifact which she believes they would find most desirable—a portal knife crafted in their Far Realm. I was to deliver the offer, and the meeting place, a warehouse near to the river. She will come only for one of your masters, though. Invadiah believed Glasya would ambush them and use them as she wishes once they are hers."

"Does she think we are fools?" the servitor asked. "She cannot make servants of the Sovereignty. And now we know of the artifact, what is to stop our masters from breaching the Hells and taking it? What would stop them from agreeing and sending their terrible minions to meet her?"

Rohini hesitated. To say more was beyond treason.

You are already beyond treason, the voice reminded her. If Glasya does not fall, you will.

"Should you or your masters attempt to breach Malbolge, you would fail," she said. "The Sovereignty is no doubt wise enough to know that. They are also wise enough not to make such a vulnerable gesture for a mere artifact that might or might not even exist.

“But what you miss, to your detriment, is that Glasya is not foolish enough to think you would.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sairché waited outside the door to Invadiah's chambers, counting the erinyes that entered in full armor: Eretria. Chaeronea. Suessula. Zela. Megara. Sabis. Tanagra. Bibracte. Lutetia. Oenophyta. Noreia. Alesia. With Invadiah a full thirteen armed to the teeth and ready for Invadiah's command, to kill Lorcan, to kill Rohini, and to finish what had been started in Neverwinter.

The imp she'd sent to Invadiah had predictably not returned, but another imp had brought her a summons to appear before her mother. She took it graciously, and tucked it into her sleeve where she continued ignoring it. Obviously, Invadiah trusted Sairché's word if she was amassing so many armed erinyes to her side. She didn't need to hear from Sairché until after she'd returned.

A small part of Sairché wished she could go to Neverwinter and watch everything unfold, but she quashed it: It wasn't necessary. In fact, it would be extremely foolish. Besides—she had no way to cross the planes anymore, short of asking Invadiah.

Another imp appeared beside her with a soft *pop*. "Her Highness wishes you to pay her audience."

Sairché shuddered and pulled her cloak around her. "Tell her I will be with her presently."

Farideh's lungs were screaming, her muscles aching as she ran—for the second time that night—as fast as she could along the main roads. And Mehen was gaining on her. Close enough to hear his labored breath—

The crack of his lightning breath rattled the alleyway. The lightning scoured her skin, the sudden pain driving the air from her lungs with a sharp cry. But still she ran, slower now and gasping. Her nerves threatened to overtake her and make her cry like a child, as Clanless Mehen sought to slay his foster daughter.

Farideh drew on the powers of the Hells and split the fabric of the world enough for her to dart through, and come clear around the corner and several buildings farther on. She ducked into an alleyway and flattened herself against the wall. Mehen ran past, but only a short distance before he circled back to the intersection where she'd lost him, tapping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Farideh drew her breath in such slow, even drafts that she thought she would surely faint.

I'm sorry, she thought. But Lorcan was, as ever, right.

She stepped into the street and pointed the rod at her father. "*Adaestuo*."

The bolt of eldritch light slammed into Mehen, and he roared in shock and pain, but he did not fall. He turned jerkily to face her and drew his falchion.

"Mehen," she said, "don't do this. You don't need to do this. Rohini's not here."

"She will be there when I …" He stilled, blinked … and then bared his teeth in sudden rage. "When I bring back your head, warlock."

"Mehen, put your sword down," she said, holding up the rod and feeling the magical energy of the Hells flooding through her. "It's *me*."

Mehen answered with a vicious swing level with her head. She ducked beneath it and took a step back. She took the rod in her left hand and drew her sword.

The *whoosh* of Lorcan's wings as he plummeted brought Mehen's head up a second before the cambion dropped solidly into his back. Mehen's head cracked against the cobbles and he went slack.

"Tie him!" Lorcan shouted. "Tie him, damn it!"

"Calm down," Farideh said. She kneeled down beside Mehen and reached a shaking hand toward his face. He was breathing, but out

cold.

Farideh nudged Lorcan off Mehen and jerked the harness off Mehen's shoulders. She slid it down to his elbows, knotting the loose loops together, so that his arms were bound. "Help me move him."

She had a perverse sense of satisfaction watching Lorcan struggle as much as she with Mehen's heavy bulk. They would never have gotten him from the temple into the city. But when his arm brushed hers, she flushed nonetheless.

They settled Mehen against a wall, behind a pile of rubble. Farideh kneeled down, assessing the dragonborn's wounds. "He doesn't look good."

Lorcan jerked her to her feet. The amulet exploded with a cold, silvery light. Lorcan threw his hands up to ward it off and fell back.

"Godsdamn it!"

"If you don't like it, don't shove me around," she said, her voice shaking. The air was simmering again. "No one said you had to come back."

He seized his hair in his fists. "Planes and ashes, you do understand Rohini's not a shitting goblin you can wave your hands and distract?"

"I had to do something." She gestured at Mehen. "He's half-dead as it is. She had him …" Her voice caught. "She had him fighting like it didn't matter. Like he could simply take the cuts and bruises and … whatever her magic does. She would have killed him."

"She's going to kill you. She *knows* you're alive now."

"She knows you're alive too! You should have taken the chance," she said. "You can't get to the portal now."

"So I was supposed to just—" He waved his hands vaguely. "I should have. I should have run past while she was distracted." He cursed to himself. "You're not worth this." He cursed again. "Neither is a bloody aboleth."

"No it isn't." And suddenly things fit together a little better. "Oh."

It was, ironically, one of Mehen's favorite tactics: burst onto the battlefields with a great storm and thunder, rattling shields and blades and breathing lightning, looking for all the world like your

enemy's worst nightmare. And while they stared at you and pondered how to take you down, your allies came around behind and cut your enemies throats.

"What if that's it?" she said, half to herself.

"What in the Hells are you talking about?" Lorcan cried. "What if *what's* it?"

"Your mistress," she said, "do you think she'd go to all this trouble to gain a … a monster from another world's memories?"

"Yes!" he said. "Think of the power—"

"What power though?" Farideh asked. "If they're as alien as the Chasm, what good would their thoughts be? They might know ten thousand years' worth of knowledge, but what good is that if they don't think like her? That didn't make any sense. It still doesn't." She held Lorcan's gaze. "Especially because the Ashmadai never fit. Is it possible that all of this was meant to get the Ashmadai out in the open? To get them to call down Asmodeus? Or even … just to make him notice the Sovereignty? To focus on that? Why else would the Ashmadai be looking for Glasyans in the hospital?"

Lorcan started to answer, but stopped and pursed his lips. "It's possible," he said a moment later. "She likes making trouble. Everyone knows she doesn't get along with her father."

"So she might start a war, after all, not between the Layers," Farideh said, "but between the Sovereignty and the god of evil."

Lorcan shook his head. "She's an archduchess of the Hells. She's too clever to antagonize her father like that, now that he's a god."

"But if she were clever and angry," Farideh said, "she might create a chain of events that … don't *look* as though she's trying to antagonize him. That get Asmodeus's eye fixed on Neverwinter and another, powerful, *alien* enemy."

"So she may act elsewhere," Lorcan finished. He shuddered. "And you and I got in the way."

"But what is she doing?"

Lorcan reached forward as if he would clap a hand over her mouth again, but closed his hands on the empty air. "*Stop* asking that. You don't need to know. You don't want to know."

"Don't—"

“Shut up, darling, just shut up and trust me here, you do not need to know what the archduchess’s plans are.” He rubbed his wrists where the amulet’s fire had burned them. “And you had best hope like you’ve never hoped, that—”

“They *matter,*” she said, “because it means the Ashmadai’s plan to attack the temple is just as likely *her* plan. They will come and burn the place to the ground, and kill everyone in it.” She looked at him gravely. “Something has its powers over Rohini—she isn’t on Glasya’s side anymore. And if you’re right and your mother’s erinyes come to clean things up, Rohini isn’t going to go quietly. It will be a bloodbath. Perhaps not one your lady’s planning on. Certainly not one Neverwinter’s expecting.”

Lorcan ran his hands through his hair. “If you are right, *if* that is Glasya’s plan, then I don’t think Invadiah knows it. What she threatened Rohini with … she *will* come as soon as she knows Rohini’s been captured. She will bring the *pradixikai.* And whatever the Ashmadai might do, whatever Rohini and the Sovereignty might be capable of, whatever the shitting god of evil might stir up, the *pradixikai* loose in Faerûn is reason enough to get far, far away—Hey!” Lorcan shouted.

Farideh looked over her shoulder to see Brin jogging back to the alley’s mouth, his sword unsheathed and his face pale. His eyes were wide and terrified.

“What happened?” Farideh said.

“He took her,” Brin gasped. “The Ashmadai have Havilar.”

“No.” Farideh’s ears were suddenly numb and ringing. She reached behind her to lean on the wall. “Where? When?”

“Outside the shop,” Brin said, still quite out of breath. “The shopkeeper. He came out of nowhere and just … knocked her senseless with some amulet. And that’s not all.”

He explained what he’d heard: the Ashmadai had decided Havilar’s attack was an act of war by the Sovereignty. The shopkeeper seemed to believe that it had been Havilar’s magic that convinced them of the idea, and now the Ashmadai were amassing to attack the House of Knowledge and burn it to the ground.

“Bad to worse,” Lorcan muttered. “You’re right.”

Farideh held her tongue, preoccupied with the repeating images from her nightmares of Havilar being tormented and not being able to save her. She wanted to scream. She wanted to yell at Brin for letting this happen—he'd promised to watch after Havilar.

Brin was watching her, as if he knew all of that. As if he were expecting her ire. Lorcan folded his arms, the smallest of smiles quirking his mouth, as if he knew it too.

She took a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut a moment.

"First," she said, "we need to fix Mehen. He's wounded and—"

"The moment he wakes he'll try and kill you again!" Lorcan said.

"And," she continued, "we have to break the domination. The two of us can't count on saving Havilar alone. And we need Havilar if we're going to be able to stop the Ashmadai or Rohini."

"You need far more than just Havilar," Lorcan said.

"No one is asking for your opinion."

"Someone should be," he said. "If … if you are correct about Glasya, you're assuring your own death to challenge anyone involved in this nonsense—you don't even know which pieces are hers. Even if you could defeat Rohini or those stupid cultists or the *pradixikai* or those servitors and whatever monsters they call up, you are forgetting that the archduchess is watching."

"For now," Farideh said, "we're just saving Havilar." Even though she couldn't help but remember all the soldiers from the Wall in their sickbeds and the young and preening acolytes who didn't deserve to burn alive.

Brin squatted down beside Mehen. He held out one tentative hand, the beginnings of divine magic swirling at the tips of his fingers.

"If you heal him," Lorcan said, "he might still be dominated."

"Do it," Farideh said.

Mehen felt his body stir, and then his mind scramble toward waking. Where was he? What had happened? His eyes opened, letting in hazy shapes—Brin kneeling in front of him, Farideh close

by. His vision darkened again, his mind sliding away from the world.

He had been running. Chasing. Farideh, seeping hellfire and miasma, trying to kill good people, people like Rohini. In the dark streets of Neverwinter she glowed like a beacon of Hellish magic. He had to stop her.

It was that filthy devil of course, it could only be. She was corrupted, overtaken. Subdue her, subdue her.

No, that won't work, a voice whispered through his thoughts. She's too far gone. Do what you must. He'd breathed the lightning.

And then? He couldn't remember. Didn't want to remember.

Cool light flared before Mehen's eyes and the sound of a sword on a whetstone jerked his attention away from the memories. The pain in his head faded, but the fear and adrenaline were still pulsing through him. There again was Brin. Good lad, he thought blinking drowsily at him. He coughed. "Where …"

Be careful, something thought for him and bared his teeth. Right, right—the boy was trouble.

"Mehen."

He whipped his head around to see Farideh kneeling down beside him, looking worried. Then … no, not worried—cruel. Shadows wafted off of her and her eyes had changed: one red as coals, one black as soot. The devil's doing. The devil hovering behind her with hateful eyes.

"Mehen," she said again—a taunt, a slight. He hadn't stopped her. He tried to reach out, to press the vein that would make her sleep, but his arms were tightly bound behind him, no matter how he struggled. He tapped the roof of his mouth with his tongue: fear, uncertainty, blood. He was as good as dead.

She could have been safe, he thought despairing. She could have been happy.

"Mehen, look at me," she said. "Please."

The alley lurched, sharpened. Her eyes were gold and silver again. Brin was nothing but a worried boy. Lorcan still stood behind her, all nerves and irritation.

“I …” He looked off down the alley. “I was supposed to …” He shuddered again and the world blurred.

It’s you’re fault she’s fallen, something whispered, so you have to be the one to stop her. This is the only way to save her.

He shook his head. If Mehen was the cause of his daughter’s fall, then it was because he’d pressed her too hard, driven her when he should have been wary and listened. And planes above, he’d known better—how different was it from Clan Verthisathurgiesh insisting their favored son wed or be cast out? He kept shaking his head. It *was* his fault. All his fault.

“Fight it off,” Farideh said, this time in Draconic, and again when he opened his eyes, she skipped from something horrible and lost to his daughter, tired and concerned, and back again.

Lorcan laid a hideous hand on her shoulder. “Give it up,” he said, and his voice hissed and snapped. “You can’t break the domination and if you try much longer he’s going to lash out.”

Farideh narrowed those wicked eyes, but didn’t look back at the devil. “Lorcan, you’ve already made your point clear. We’re not leaving him.”

Mehen’s mouth twitched. There’s a girl.

“He’s not safe,” the devil hissed. “That’s all I’m saying. He’s not safe and he might never be safe again.”

“If you’re afraid,” Farideh said, “you can go wait by the gate. Otherwise, kindly keep quiet.” She skipped back to the clear, normal version. Perhaps … perhaps he ought to worry less about whether she could protect herself.

Another burst of cold light shivered over him, and this time he made out the words of Brin’s prayer. The magic shivered over his scales and he felt the spell Rohini had laid on him break apart like a stretched net popping knots.

His mind cleared, the world stayed focused. Mehen drew a long, unsteady breath and focused on Farideh.

“I was trying to kill you,” he said, horrified.

“It’s all right,” she said, relief in her voice. “I’m fine.”

“No,” he said, his heart cracking. He’d chased her down, his blade bare. He’d threatened her, he’d used the lightning breath. “Oh, Fari,

tell me I didn't hurt you."

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm fine. Are you well? Do you feel … odd?"

For the first time in days, he felt completely himself. "*Karshoji Tiamat*. Fari. I was so worried … like a horrible nightmare you can't stir from. And she took hold of those nightmares—" His voice caught. She'd turned him against Farideh, so completely. He would never forgive himself for that. "And worse that I'd snapped at you … when your sister …" He looked around. "Where's Havi?"

Farideh's face fell. "Havi …" she started.

Mehen stiffened. "What happened?"

She paused and wet her lips. "Havi's been captured. It was an accident, I wasn't—"

"*Thrik,*" Mehen said gently. Planes, she was so ready for him to blame her. No wonder Rohini had you so easily, he thought. You push her too hard. "You'd never have let it happen if there were any way to stop it." She unknotted the harness and he listened to Farideh explain what had happened, and what she was afraid was coming. "Do you have a plan?" he asked, coming to his feet.

"It's … sort of," she said. "I don't know if it will work. You'll go after Havilar," she said. "The Ashmadai will converge on the House of Knowledge soon, but you need to catch Yvon as far from there as you can. You can't get near Rohini again."

"Let me near her and I'll rip the *kothar karshoji's* head off."

"No," Farideh said. "She'll dominate you again, and then we'll just be in worse shape. Get Havilar and head for the gates."

"And you?" Mehen said. "Where will you be?"

"Making room for you to get Havilar," she said. "I'll find a way to distract Yvon's fellows so they don't come after you." She looked up at Lorcan. "If all of this is just another distraction to keep eyes off Glasya, perhaps everyone would be more interested in what the Sixth Layer might be doing."

Lorcan looked as if he might have protested, but something changed in the air and both of them, devil and warlock, seemed to have the wind momentarily knocked from them. Mehen reached to steady Farideh.

"What was that?" Farideh said.

Lorcan's mouth made a line so hard it might have been chiseled there. "That," he said, "was an extremely large portal opening. Considering our circumstances, I suggest—again—we get out of here, because if we are fortunate that is my mother and her army, and if we are not, the Ashmadai have called down their god."

Farideh turned a cold eye on Lorcan. "Make up your mind, right now. You're helping or you're not: which is it?"

"That depends entirely on your plans—"

"Which I am not stupid enough to tell you if there's still a good chance you'll hare back to your mother's side. Choose."

He fidgeted. "You cannot fight them all."

"Choose, Lorcan."

"Promise me first you won't try."

"I swear I won't try to fight all of them. I want Havilar back safe and the hospital not burned down. If we can manage else, we will."

Lorcan hesitated. "Fine. I promise I'll help you get Havilar back safe. And the hospital if it's convenient." He scowled. "And I wouldn't go back to my mother—giving her your silly plans isn't going to make her want to kill me any less. I'd like to hear your plan for *that*."

"We cannot fight them all," she agreed, "so we deal with them each separately. The Ashmadai first, then the Sovereignty, then the erinyes."

"Of course," Lorcan said, "and afterward we bring down the demon princes. You cannot kill any of those!"

"We don't need to kill them," she said. "We just need to make them back down. By playing them off each other."

"My enemies' enemies are allies not-yet-confirmed," Mehen quoted.

"Exactly," Farideh said, turning to Lorcan. "Your mother will deal with Rohini handily enough, yes? So we lead the erinyes to Rohini and let them take care of things. You don't get in the way when your enemies are willing to kill each other." She looked to Mehen. "You'd better go. He'll be between the shop we stopped at the first day and the House of Knowledge. He'll want as many of the

Ashmadai near before …" She swallowed. "Before he makes his point."

Mehen seized her in a fierce embrace. She went stiff in his arms, as if she didn't know what was happening. She reached an arm around Mehen and relaxed a little.

"For the love of all the planes, be careful," he said. "We have too much to say to leave it here." He squeezed her once and stepped back. He glowered at Lorcan. "And you …" He'd still have liked to punch the cambion right across the jaw, but not now. Not while Farideh needed him. "Prove your damn worth." He spat.

"To you? I think I have," the cambion said. "Twice now in fact."

"Stop it," Farideh snapped. "Mehen, go. Lorcan and Brin, we have to find where the erinyes' portal opened." They all started toward the end of the alley.

"How will you get rid of Invadiah once she's finished?" he heard Lorcan ask. "And who will kill the Ashmadai? Not the erinyes—you can't start a battle in the Hells."

Farideh hesitated. "We don't kill the Ashmadai," she said. "We make them think they aren't needed so they go away."

Mehen eyed the empty street and turned toward the south.

"Are you going to burn down the House of Knowledge yourself?" he heard Lorcan ask.

Mehen almost wished he'd been too far to hear Farideh's answer. "Not precisely," she said. "I need you to set fire to me."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Farideh had no glass to tell the time, but surely by now the amulet's power over Lorcan had faded, and she watched him with a fair amount of trepidation and more than a little respect. He meant what he'd promised, it seemed.

"The erinyes are heading this way out of the ruined district," Brin reported back. He had run ahead and scaled the tallest building he could find. "They're staying on the widest road, a straight shot for here. Torm knows what they'll do when they reach the Wall. There're at least ten of them."

"Thirteen," Lorcan said when he returned. "If there are only erinyes, then there will be thirteen. The *praxidikai*—a full 'justice' of erinyes for Rohini, because she broke her oath to an archdevil." He shook his head again, but to his credit did not insist they should flee.

"The Ashmadai seem to have split themselves," he reported, "but you were right. The larger group is headed to this intersection." They stood at the plaza of the fountain, the spot where the Chasm wall dipped farthest into the city, and where the widest northern road met the main road.

"Tell me," Lorcan said, "that you have given up this fool idea of setting yourself on fire."

"A person on fire is going to catch their attention," she said, tying the rags of her torn robes to the sleeves of her armor. "And if she is not screaming and trying to put out the flame, then they are really going to notice."

"You are a tiefling," Lorcan said, though he pinned the pair of charms that would keep her from catching fire too easily to her

shoulders. “Not a shitting phoenix—the flames will burn you through eventually.”

“Which is why we must time everything right.”

Before long Farideh stood atop a crop of rock, Brin at the base, shrouded by Lorcan’s invisibility charm, and Lorcan behind her, muttering steadily about the futility of the plan and how he would take off with her the second the Ashmadai came too close.

“If you do,” she said, “I will kick you in the knees until you drop me. Stop complaining.” But for all her surety, the shadows crept out of her skin and swaddled them all.

Down the opposite road, the Ashmadai marched, their faces covered and hooded but the insignia of their alliance clear in the light of the flickering torches they carried. Those who did not hold torches carried bundles of kindling and glass bottles stuffed with rags and sloshing with accelerants. They made a poor pretense of quiet, too riled, it seemed, by the promise of impending havoc.

Behind her, beyond the Wall, she heard the terrible march of cloven feet.

“Go,” Farideh whispered, and she drew a deep breath to pull the shadows back into herself.

“Halt!” Brin cried, and his voice echoed and rebounded, loud enough to make the Ashmadai stop and not a few flinch back. Behind her, Lorcan whispered the spell that sent a gust of fire washing over her, igniting the shredded robes. He took a step back, less protected than he’d been before and spread his wings to good effect. Several of the more timid Ashmadai turned and fled.

But others were only emboldened. “Who are you to tell the servants of the Raging Fiend to halt?” one called, stepping forward.

Farideh did not answer at first, counting out the seconds in her head. Then a terrible clatter came from the Wall. She lifted her head slowly, dramatically, and cast her own curtain of flames at the surrounding cultists.

“I am the champion of Malbolge,” she said. She heard Brin draw his sword before scurrying into the nearest alleyway. “My lady knows your plans and orders you to cease … before you do

anything *foolish*." Again the sound of something heavy bashing into the aged wall, the clamor of an army, the crash of weapons.

The man who had stepped forward glanced back at his fellows as if he could not believe what he'd heard. "I think perhaps you are mistaken, girl. I think perhaps you are the warlock we've been warned of."

The flames licked at her hair and cheeks now, but Farideh did not dare flinch. The shadows curled out from her to compensate, and she hoped dearly that it made a good effect. The stones around the fountain loosened and rattled to the ground.

"You speak of my sister-at-arms … a traitor to the … archduchess." She stumbled as the fire grew hot enough to be felt through the charms, and briefly worried that was the wrong title. "We seek the same enemy," she finished. She risked a glance back at the Wall. There were shadowy shapes clambering over the edges.

"Then let us have her and we will be done with this nonsense!"

"This is not a matter for the Ashmadai," she said. "This is for Malbolge to address. If you deny my mistress her vengeance against the one who has broken her oath and given over her secrets to the monsters of the Chasm"—the fire started to smolder along the leather of her armor—"then you shall be the next to taste her wrath. Favored you might be among men, but you risk the wrath of Glasya."

"Then *she* risks the wrath of Asmodeus!" the leader shouted, but his comrades were definitely backing away from Farideh, setting down their kindling, as if getting ready to fight or run. The shouts of erinyes accompanied the clatter of hooks on stone, the scramble of hooves against brick.

"What the ruler of Malbolge risks is not a mortal's concern," Farideh shouted quickly. "Consider then the rage of Asmodeus when he discovers your disobedience, that you have made yourselves an obstacle in Glasya's retribution.

"Behold," she shouted. "Her army approaches."

Lorcan seized her then and pulled her off her perch, into the shadows of the alleyway. Either the Ashmadai had been convinced,

or they would not be convinced, but she did not want the *pradixikai*'s attentions.

The erinyes in their black and shining armor crashed into the fountain square, one after another, smashing the delicate fountain to pieces. They towered several heads over the gawping Ashmadai. Where two had seemed a storm, thirteen—their leader larger and fiercer with that burning blade—made Farideh think of the mountain erupting, of the unstoppable flow of lava and ash that must have once enveloped Neverwinter.

The leader—Invadiah, surely—strode past, with eyes only for the temple ahead, and Farideh shuddered to think what having such a nightmare for a mother would be like. Others of the *pradixikai* broke their discipline to notice the gaping Ashmadai. One muscular erinyes with a shock of crimson hair swept her blade through the leader of the Ashmadai, cutting him neatly in twain. She cackled.

Farideh clapped a hand to her mouth to stem the gorge she felt rising at the man still blinking and clutching his hands at his spilling guts. The erinyes prodded at his still moving mouth with the tip of her sword. Lorcan mutely turned Farideh's head aside, as the sounds of further slaughter rang through the streets.

"I told you Aornos and Nemea weren't the worst," he said quietly. "If they have half a mind among them—ah, there."

The Ashmadai were fleeing their path of vengeance and the blades of the terrible erinyes, leaving behind the bleeding bodies of their fellows to lie in the damp streets and chased by the crowed insults of the mad erinyes. She turned at last and fit herself back into formation, blood still dripping down her sword.

Brin let the invisibility fall away. "One down," he said, with an attempt at cheer.

Havilar made her body rigid as a board, so that only her heels dragged along the cobbles, and tried to jerk herself free by catching on the protruding stones. The shopkeeper only stopped and clouted

her so hard she saw stars, before resuming his trek again, her glaive now his walking stick.

She had stayed firm and calm as Mehen would have exhorted her to. Then she had broken down in a panic that had soaked her gag with her own tears. Now she was calm again, and determined, at the very least, to give the bastard enough trouble that he remembered her long after he'd done the sacrificing.

That stirred up the panic again, and she made herself breathe more slowly.

At times, she knew they'd called her "the brave one," but it wasn't always the case. There was plenty Havilar didn't fear compared to her sister—*that* was true without a doubt—but when things were very bad—like when Farideh had been lost in the woods or when Havilar had woken after she'd killed all those Ashmadai—Farideh could be as calm as a general out of one of Mehen's stories. And Havilar …

Havilar wanted Farideh to save her.

"We are nearly there," her captor said, with a mad sort of cheer. "They will see I was right. Oh, ho! They will see I was more than right—I am favored."

You must think like Farideh would, she told herself. I could fight him if I were free. I could cut myself free if I had a knife. He has my blade though, and I'm too bound up to use it. And though he had dragged her over what felt like miles of cobblestones and refuse, the ropes were only fraying the smallest bit.

If he came close enough, she might kick him with both legs together. But she could not fathom how to make the shopkeeper stand where she might get a good shot at his vitals. Surely, he wasn't *that* stupid.

He hauled her into a proper road and Havilar cast her gaze around for some sign that Farideh had figured out how to save her. Or barring that, a knife seller who would like to test his wares on her bindings. But if there were anyone in the road, they were steadfastly ignoring the madman dragging her unyielding form toward the House of Knowledge. *Henish*, she thought bitterly.

The flash of movement along the buildings on the far side of the road caught her attention. Someone was tracking them, moving through the shadows, and despite herself, Havilar felt her panic rising.

"They will be along here," the shopkeeper said, half to himself. "They will have to listen … we will find them soon enough, and then—"

A great shape barreled out of the night and into the shopkeeper. A spidery arc of lightning cast over the distance between it and the cultist, and in the brief light, Havilar picked out the shape of Mehen, his falchion at the ready.

The shopkeeper swung the glaive clumsily at Mehen, refusing to let go of Havilar's bindings. Mehen stepped out of its path and swung the heavy falchion down into the shopkeeper's arm. Blood spattered against her scalp, and she crashed to the ground as the shopkeeper screamed and lost his grip.

Havilar rolled herself onto her stomach and got her knees under her so she could pull herself upright. Mehen's sword drove back the bloodied cultist, who stubbornly clung to her glaive as his other arm gushed bright red blood through a wound that peeled muscle back to expose the bright white of bone beneath.

He managed to block Mehen's next two strikes with the glaive, then suddenly cast the glaive aside to reach into his pocket.

Havilar screamed through her gag: the amulet. One opening and Mehen would be knocked on his back as neatly as she had been. Oblivious to the danger, Mehen pulled his sword back for a wide slash. The shopkeeper held the amulet in his palm, leaning toward him.

Havilar got her feet under her and stood woozily. She lowered her head and charged, horns first at the shopkeeper. The crash shook her skull down to the neck and she fell to her knees. With a great cry, the shopkeeper was thrown from his feet and landed hard on the cobbles. The amulet flew through the air to skitter to a stop at Mehen's feet. He kicked it into the shadows, and slashed the falchion across the hamstrings of the fallen shopkeeper, who was

trying to find his bearings. The shopkeeper screamed again, his cries falling into great moaning sobs.

Mehen rushed to Havilar, unsteady on his feet, and tore the gag from her mouth. The air might have been humid and close, but it still felt cold and refreshing compared to the sodden rag, and she took great gulps of it before Mehen crushed her to him.

"Thank the gods," she said, tears springing to her eyes. "I could *not* figure …" She trailed off as she realized Clanless Mehen was weeping too.

"You're all right?" he asked.

"Bumped and scraped and bruised," she said, as he cut through the ropes around her chest and wrists. "Where's Farideh? And Brin?"

Mehen shook his head grimly. "Keeping the rest of these bastards at a distance. We're to get Tam and the city guard. We'll meet the others at the gate." If they're still alive, Havilar thought.

"No," she said, "please. We need to help them. I can't bear…. Please Mehen."

"I don't like it either, but there's foul magic happening, and we can't risk it."

"At least let's make sure they're all right!"

Mehen hesitated—clearly he did not like being sent to cool his heels while Farideh risked herself any more than Havilar did. And surely—surely—the two of them could be of some use without coming too near Rohini.

"No." He helped her stand. "Grab your glaive. We have to get the guard."

Havilar cursed and grumbled to herself, but she did as he said. They moved through the side streets, away from the main road, away from the action. At every crossing Havilar looked for signs of trouble in the direction of the House of Knowledge. She *needed* to be there, not hunting up guardsmen to show up too late.

But the last time she'd run off on her own, she'd been caught by the shopkeeper.

Still she hurried ahead of Mehen. The Hall of Justice's doors were hanging open, and from inside a cacophony of voices shouted at one

another. There were half-a-dozen soldiers, their armor blazoned with lion's heads and gauntlets like the one on Brin's medallion. Two of them held Tam's arms, and the wiry priest was making sure their work was cut out for them.

"I didn't know about the fire," he shouted. "I was only reporting the bodies. What sort of idiot do you take me for?"

"It's the way things are done," the armored woman before him said. "We'll sort things out once the ashes cool. Never fear."

"You don't have *time* for that!

"He's right!" Havilar said. A few of the guards turned to stare at her. The armored woman ignored her. This, she thought, is exactly why I should be with Farideh.

"Havilar?" Tam said. "What are you doing here? You were supposed to—"

"There's a battle," Mehen interrupted coming in behind her. "A battle brewing with cultists and devils and planes know what else. You need to send your troops to the House of Knowledge before all the Hells break loose."

Hurry, Havilar nearly shouted. If they went now, perhaps she could still help.

The armored woman peered at Mehen. "Who are you?"

"He's trustworthy," Tam said. "And she was one of the two who saw the murder scene. Will you *listen?*"

Outside a horn sang an alarm that echoed over the half-built buildings, the ancient temples and the mountains beyond. Havilar jerked toward the noise. "What's that?"

"That's the soldiers on the Wall," the armored woman said. "Something's wrong."

That did it. Mehen could do as he liked, but Farideh needed her now. Havilar took off running toward the House of Knowledge, fast as her aching legs could carry her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Farideh raced along the alleys that paralleled the main road, scrambling over refuse and scree and unconscious bodies alike. Overhead, hidden by his charm, Lorcan flew. If she glanced up, she could almost perceive the disturbance in the air that marked his passage, but she had not tried for several minutes, she was too focused not tripping over the detritus. Brin ran ahead of her, the pale of his shirt like a torch in the night.

They reached the hospital only seconds before the squadron of erinyes and tucked themselves behind an abandoned food stall in the shadow of one of the buttresses.

For a moment, it looked as if the erinyes meant to enter the House of Knowledge. But then a familiar figure launched herself from one of the high windows.

"Welcome to Neverwinter, my captain," Rohini said, hanging in the air on wings made of nightmares. "A pity you're too late."

"Traitor!" Invadiah bellowed. "You'll return to the Hells—in shackles or in pieces, I care not which. But you've broken your last oath."

Rohini laughed. "And? I am beyond oaths, beyond allegiances." She flew a little higher and the soldiers on the wall sent a volley of arrows over at her. Rohini gave them no notice. "Especially not for a hierarchy eager to use me up and leave me for dead like an enemy on the field." She raised her arms, hideous light dancing up her skin and shooting off into the night.

A terrible cacophony came from the other side of the Wall—from the Chasm beyond. The soldiers on the Wall screamed and swords rang against the stone. One long tentacle reached over the Wall,

and then another, hauling up a creature with a great gaping maw of teeth. Brin started.

"No," Farideh said, throwing up an arm to stop him. "Let them kill each other. We're only going to make sure Rohini falls."

"And quickly," Brin said, pointing to the slimy-skinned man standing in the doorway beside Brother Vartan. "That one serves the aboleths. I would stake everything on it. He can call the monsters from the Chasm, same as Rohini."

Another three creatures—bristling, squidlike things that belonged in the sea and not the air at all—shot over the Wall and attacked the erinyes. The largest creature heaved itself to the ground, shaking the already fragile buildings.

Lorcan landed beside her, his invisibility gone. "Damn spell has run out." He stared at the horrors of the Chasm. "Lords…. "

The erinyes divided into clusters of three and went after the monsters with deadly precision. Still, for every grave wound or severed tentacle, an erinyes reeled from poison or dropped her weapons to clutch her head. Invadiah herself was in better stead, her flaming sword deflecting the worst of the largest monster's attacks.

But none had reached Rohini. And they were falling.

The succubus landed lightly beside the servitor, sickly magic dancing over her like a second skin. She surveyed the wild battle with an air of amusement.

"Here's a prophecy for you," Farideh heard the succubus say. "This city will be your grave." She turned to the man. "I hope you don't mind sharing it with all the rest."

Rohini's hand shot out and wrapped around the servitor's throat. Her fingernails lengthened, piercing the man's slick skin as he struggled against her surprising grip. A pulse of Hellish magic surged through Rohini and into the man, rocking him with a convulsion violent enough that Farideh heard bones crack.

"A fitting offering," Rohini crooned, "the City of Jewels. A sacrifice to fallen Arunika. To lost Rohini. And your masters … well, they won't care a bit. You shouldn't have pressed me."

Another pulse of Hellish power–mingled now with the strange, dancing magic–shook the man. Rohini released him and he collapsed to the stone stairs.

Farideh gripped the broken wood of the stall's edge. Rohini gestured again at the wider city, flinging streamers of her strange magic out into the night. The creatures from the Chasm lifted heads, eyes, and tentacles, following the path of her casting into the city beyond. One fleshy beast, all barbs and wet eyes, sprang forward, crashing into the ancient brickwork of a merchant's shop.

The erinyes were nothing but a pebble in Rohini's path, Farideh thought. She pulled the rod from her sleeve.

"Lorcan, go up and strike at her from above," Farideh said. When he started to argue, she added, "We can't get away as long as she can make those monsters do her bidding. Brin, get your sword ready and for the love of Torm, hope your spells work."

One of the large monster's tentacles slammed down on the stall, shattering it into splinters. The three of them scrambled backward out of the way as it rose up again, waving over the battling devils.

Farideh ran into the street, trusting that they would follow her, not caring if they did because she knew she had to stop Rohini before she destroyed everything. As she ran, she pulled her rod free and called up the powers of the Hells. Not fire, she remembered. Missiles of brimstone rained down on Rohini and Brother Vartan, on the appendages of the larger monster that waved too near.

Rohini grinned. "Ah, Glasya's latest prize." Vartan's lip curled and his hands wove the paths of some spell.

"I have him," Brin shouted as he passed.

A bolt of energy streamed down from where Lorcan hovered and struck Rohini. She screamed in rage and cast her own magic up at him. He ducked it and swooped farther back.

Farideh started to cast another rain of missiles, when Rohini launched at her. Her talons closed on Farideh's arms and pulled her in close.

"You've been so difficult," she said. "Twisted out of my grasp so many times." A shock of pain burst over Farideh, driving her breath from her lungs. Her knees buckled, but Rohini held her up, her mad

eyes dancing. “I don’t play by your rules anymore. Let’s see how Lorcan likes fighting his little toy to the death.”

Something heavy wrapped itself around Farideh’s heart, and something sharp sank itself into her mind. She could hardly remember how to breathe—where was she? What nightmare was this? Something terrible was circling her overhead, she had to knock it from the sky. The woman standing in front of her was giving her an eager, ferocious look … Did she know her? Yes, Rohini. And the creature above wanted to hurt Rohini and Farideh both. Only she could save … Rohini.

Rohini.

Farideh blinked and her heart seized.

Rohini, who had nearly killed her sister.

She pointed the rod at Rohini’s throat. “*Adaestuo.*”

The blast seared away the succubus’s skin and sprayed blood over both her and Farideh. Farideh pulled the rod back like a club and cracked it hard across the succubus’s face. Rohini reeled back, but as Farideh stepped toward her, vertigo overtook her—the succubus’s domination wasn’t completely gone. She glanced up in time to see Lorcan hit the Wall hard as a tentacle lashed out of the sky and into him. He scrabbled at a window ledge and clung on long enough to get his bearings and draw his sword before leaping back into the sky.

Behind Rohini, Brin dodged Brother Vartan’s blast of magic and sank his sword into the twisted priest. The man collapsed, not only blood pouring from his wounds, but a colorless slime that Brin stepped neatly out of—the horrors of Vartan’s search for secret knowledge.

Rohini straightened, her eyes mad, the powers of the Hells and the Sovereignty warring over her skin. She spotted Brin, and her eyes took on a wicked gleam.

“Come here, boy,” she said sweetly. “I have need of your sword.” Brin straightened, his eyes glazing. He looked down at the servitor and the sword in his hand, then up at Rohini, puzzled. He took a step forward.

Rohini screamed, her wings going stiff and thrust back. Both Brin and Farideh stumbled as the traces of her magic fled.

Rohini gasped and spat blackish blood, then slid to her knees, her wings drooping.

The blade of Havilar's glaive was buried in her back. Havilar yanked it free and Rohini fell face first into the ground. Havilar spat.

"And I *still* don't think you're pretty," Havilar said. She looked down at Farideh. "Are you all right?"

"Move!" Lorcan swept down and caught Farideh, shoving her out of the way. Havilar scrambled after them, dragging Brin behind her.

Farideh glanced back to see Invadiah swinging her blazing sword at the larger monster's last tentacle. The thing gave a horrible scream and recoiled, waving in the air. It slammed down beside Rohini's broken body, then slithered heavily around her, pulling the fouled succubus up and over the Wall. Back to the Chasm it had come from.

Farideh risked a glance around. The smaller monsters were all slowing, bleeding out as the remaining erinyes shook off the effects of their poisons and mental attacks. The guards up on the Wall were rallying.

Here, Farideh thought, is where things go sour. They could draw off the erinyes, but where to? Not here, she thought. If they could get the devils out of the city, Neverwinter might mount a reasonable defense.

"Come on," she said to Havilar, "we need to catch their attention."

Lorcan grabbed ahold of her arm. "I didn't promise my help in getting you killed."

"No one's asking for your help," she said. "If we don't, Neverwinter could fall."

"Then let it," he said. "It is not yours to care for."

"It is mine as much as it is anybody's," she said, twisting from his grip.

In front of the House of Knowledge, a bright line of red light sliced through the air, then split wide like an opening eye. A low

buzz filled Farideh's ears, and suddenly the gap exploded with creatures the size of wolves that swarmed over the erinyes, their sharp stingers glistening with venom.

"Hellwasps," Lorcan said, and he pulled both twins behind the body of the largest monster. The devils swooped over the battling erinyes, breaking off in pairs to circle them, trapping them each neatly apart from their sisters. He pulled Farideh nearer into the curl of his wing. He was shaking.

A piercing cry ripped through the night air as one erinyes sliced neatly through one of the smaller devils. It vanished in a burst of flame. Before she could so much as laugh, two of the larger hellwasps descended on her and speared her through with their stingers. She collapsed with a yelp, and the other erinyes were wise enough to take the hint and sheathe their swords.

"You are to come with us," Farideh heard one of the large ones say to Invadiah. "You are to stand for the failure of your mission."

"My mission has not failed," Invadiah countered. "It is still in progress."

"The queen deems it a failure," the hellwasp said. "You will come with us, or we have orders to kill you here. After you have reformed, you will be tried. It is your choice."

Invadiah growled, but sheathed her burning blade and set her hands atop her head. "If you recapture that succubus and my idiot son," she said, "then I will gladly go to see them punished for this disaster."

"We will find them." The hellwasps not guarding the erinyes were sweeping the street, killing the last few cultists who had the bad sense not to stay away.

Farideh turned to face Lorcan. "Run," she whispered. "Come with us."

"There is no running," he said. "They will search until they have me."

"You don't mean that," Farideh said. "They'll kill you."

"They might. And you'll be safe. I told you before, darling," he said, "I'm not such a bad fellow."

The hellwasps buzzed nearer and Farideh clung to his arm, to keep him there out of sight, to keep him from making a mistake. He was stronger than she was, though. She couldn't hold him and he broke free of her, pushing her back, farther behind the dead horror. Havilar caught hold of her as Lorcan stepped out into the open street, his hands held in a gesture of surrender. The remaining hellwasps spotted him and circled back, peering at Lorcan from one angle, then another.

Farideh found herself hoping that they would pass him over. But the pair of hellwasps seized Lorcan in their swordlike talons and ushered him through the waiting portal.

It snapped shut behind them like a slamming door, and Farideh let out the cry she'd been holding back. He was gone. She might never see him again.

It wasn't what she wanted after all.

Havilar pulled at her arm. "Come along," she said. "Unless you want to get eaten by those Chasm monsters or thrown in jail. The defenders are coming."



Farideh watched from the crest of the hill where they'd first spied Neverwinter as the sun rose and the low light painted the massive walls bloody red. She pointed at a stone near the road. "*Assulam.*" When it shattered into fragments, she sighed. A momentary comfort.

Tam and Mehen had spotted them fleeing the scene, and separated from the confused and riled guard. None of them had spoken as they rushed out of the city, carrying only their weapons, until they reached the crest of the hill.

"Rest," Mehen ordered. "Check your weapons and catch your breath. We'll have to get farther on before we try to camp in case …" He snorted. "In case *any* of those monsters come for us."

Farideh kept watching the city. The Chasm seemed to flicker more brightly than usual. She cast again on another stone, and again it shattered.

Havilar sidled up beside her. “Do you think they’ll kill Lorcan?” she asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know. He’s fine for now. I can’t get powers from a corpse.” Farideh rubbed her branded arm. “It was the only way for him to get home.” Havilar put an arm around her and squeezed.

“I can’t decide,” she said, “whether it would be better or worse for him to be gone. But I hope whatever happens isn’t too hard to bear.”

Farideh kept her eyes on Neverwinter, and bit her tongue. “I hope the city survives.”

“Of course it will,” Havilar said. “We routed *three* different threats. We ought to have stayed behind and been called heroes.”

Farideh kept quiet. There was no way, not with the Ashmadai as numerous as she’d seen, that she would stay in Neverwinter another moment. Worse, she wasn’t sure they’d been all that successful. “Did you see Rohini’s body?”

Havilar smirked. “On the end of my glaive. Do you think that monster’s going to eat her?”

“She didn’t burn up.”

“Of course she didn’t. No one set fire to her corpse. That would be horrible.”

“She’s a devil, Havi. If she died, her body should have burst into flames like those erinyes’ did.”

“Oh.” Havilar looked down at the city a moment longer. “Maybe she’s a strange kind of devil?” she said in a small voice. Farideh only hoped Rohini wouldn’t come looking for them once she’d healed herself. Whatever the Sovereignty had made of her, she was as angry as she’d been before and far more powerful.

Havilar went to sit beside Brin. Farideh broke another stone. Perhaps he would be able to convince them. Perhaps he’d be all right.

From the road to the south, the steady sound of horses thudded. Glancing back, Farideh saw a figure mounted on a heavy charger, plate mail gleaming in the sunrise. She cursed to herself. Tired as she was, it would be easier to let the rider hurl insults and ride on.

Brin had collapsed into a pile near the middle of the road, Havilar beside him. “I feel as though I could sleep for all the rest of my life. Where are we going after this?”

“I need to be in Waterdeep,” Tam said, grimly studying the curve of the High Road as it traveled away from the coast. “I’m expected there by the end of the tenday.” He paused, looking back at the twins, as if he was no longer certain what to make of them. “You’re welcome to travel with me until then.”

“If we stop in Waterdeep,” Farideh said, “we might have better luck finding a bounty. Or a guard’s job.”

“Fair enough,” Mehen said, tucking the map away. “We need to reach—”

But the rider coming up the southbound path kicked the charger into a gallop. Farideh started to step out of the road, to make way, but the rider, a woman with cropped black hair slowed, staring fixedly at the lot of them.

“Aubrin Crownsilver!” the woman bellowed.

Brin turned, and his eyes widened. “Hrast,” he said.

“Does she mean you?” Havilar asked.

The rider pulled her charger up short a dozen feet from Brin and drew her sword from its sheath. “All of you put your hands atop your heads and leave your weapons untouched.”

“Or what?” Mehen said.

“Or I shall make certain you are charged with the full range of your crimes,” she said. “Put your hands atop your heads.”

“I think we can beat her,” Havilar whispered, moving closer to Brin. “Wait,” Brin said.

“It’s better than letting her arrest you!”

“She’s not going to arrest me,” he said. “It’s Constancia.”

“Who?”

“Your bounty,” he said. “My cousin.”

The woman in the armor set her blade even with Farideh’s chest, not an ounce of fear in her cold gray eyes. The hair that had been so neatly coiffed in the printing was disheveled and filthy, but her armor put mirrors to shame.

The tip of her sword twitched, motioning Farideh aside. “Step away from His Grace.”

“His *what?*” Havilar cried. She gave Brin a little shove. “What did she call you?”

“His Grace,” Constancia said, “Lord Aubrin Crownsilver of Cormyr. Stand aside or I shall detain you for kidnapping.”

“You can try,” Farideh said, drawing on her powers. She’d be damned if she would let this woman push her aside after everything else. Whatever Brin was or wasn’t, he’d stood beside her while Rohini tried to destroy Neverwinter.

Mehen stepped forward, peering at the woman, a slow smile curving the corners of his mouth and baring his yellowed teeth. He pulled the bounty poster from his breastplate. “I beg your pardon, good-woman. But I think you’re the one under arrest.”

Constancia looked at the printing, then at Mehen’s terrible smile. She looked past him at Farideh, and the warlock met the gray-eyed glare without flinching. Constancia blinked first and took in the shimmer of violet flames in Farideh’s hands.

“Oh, they’re what you think,” Farideh said hotly.

The knight stared at Farideh a moment longer, before dropping her sword in the dust and setting her hands upon her own head. “Oh Aubrin,” she sighed. “What *have* you gotten into?”

EPILOGUE

THE PALACE OF OSSEIA, MALBOLGE, THE HELLS

THE SOUND OF GLASYA TAPPING HER SCOURGE AGAINST THE SIDE OF her throne was all Lorcan knew. Even the hellwasps had ceased their buzzing as the archduchess surveyed the devils held before her by myriad spells that left Lorcan at least, if not all of them, still and mute. He did not dare look up from the pattern of the floor.

The hellwasps had made their report, given the statements of the lesser devils for them, and fallen quiet long ago. All that remained was for Glasya to pass judgment. All that remained was for Lorcan to die.

"Well," Glasya said after an eternity, "there seems to be plenty of blame to share. Invadiah for failing in her mission. These erinyes who served her for failing in their task. The cambion"—and Lorcan's prison seemed to turn to fire; he still couldn't scream—"for interfering and for murdering my agents, for sowing discord. The erinyes, Aornos and Nemea, for failing in their task and *being* murdered. And of course … Rohini."

Tap, tap, tap.

"The traitor has not been recovered?" she asked. No one answered Glasya, and she sighed, a sound that sent shivers of horror through his own breath. Like a great beast opening wide its jaws—Glasya's displeasure meant all of their heads.

What would she do if she knew Lorcan suspected her true plans? If she had any inkling that Farideh had marked Glasya's strange machinations and picked out the far more plausible case—that Glasya sought foremost to make an enemy for Asmodeus of the Sovereignty? Would Glasya care? Would Glasya strike him down for

merely guessing? Would she send spined devils to hunt Farideh across Toril's face?

He stared fixedly at a spot on the floor and wished to never, never know.

Lorcan's vision went suddenly blank, as if his wish and his fear had been granted in the same moment—but no, he was still breathing. Then he felt his knees buckle, pressing him down into the floor, and heard the thuds of the rest of the court forced to prostrate themselves.

The sound of the god of evil entering his daughter's court was no sound—and yet Lorcan's ears felt as if someone were blasting cannons beside his head. The air was suddenly hot enough to make Lorcan's skin sting and the smell of brimstone burned his nose.

"My lord father," Glasya said. "You honor us."

You overstep your bounds, child. If Glasya's voice made Lorcan shiver, Asmodeus's made his stomach threaten to empty. Shards of glass ground into his brain would seem less wrong. *I am here to see to your own punishment.*

"I beg my lord's pardon," Glasya said without a trace of fear. "Am I to be punished for the failings of a few of my retinue in completing their tasks?"

Do not take me for a fool. I am all too aware of the damage you have done in Neverwinter.

All at once, Lorcan's remaining senses were snuffed out like a candle—he could not hear the archdevils, could not smell the scorched remains of previous prisoners, could not feel his own breath coming into and out of his lungs. He simply wasn't.

Whatever Asmodeus had to say to Glasya, it was not for a mere cambion's ears.

Just as abruptly, everything returned, and though he had no sense of how much time had rushed passed, he was sure every other devil in the palace—perhaps every devil in Malbolge—had felt the same thing.

"You have me mistaken," Glasya said. "I would have the reports of the circumstances on Toril read again, if my lord father commands it."

Do you seek to overthrow me child?

Glasya paused before replying. “Do you know you’ve never asked me that before, my lord?”

Answer the question. Here and now.

“I would not insult your intelligence, my lord. I *am* your daughter—of course, I would overthrow you given the opportunity. You’d be disappointed, Papa, if I did not.”

Asmodeus’s pride and rage mingled into a white-hot heat that burned across the court.

“But,” the archduchess continued, “you will be pleased to note I am not a fool either. My court is barely established. My powers are at a meek and tender stage. I am your vassal and your willing servant—I would not pretend to your throne. Not yet. Not for quite some time.”

I should kill you, whelp.

“You won’t,” Glasya said, without pride or daring. “There is not a Lord in the Hells who would be so honest with you. I am of use to you still. Without me you would have not been apprised of the Sovereignty’s growth. Or what they have down in that Chasm.”

Again Lorcan’s senses stopped, as if something at the core of his being had been snuffed out. This, he thought, must be what the dead feel. When the sensation of Malbolge returned around him, he nearly swooned.

“My lord father is quite wise,” Glasya said, her voice now slightly rattled, “and very generous. We shall of course cede the battle to you and your blessed followers.”

As you should.

As she has wished all along, Lorcan thought, and wished he did not think.

“Since you grace our court, my lord, would you like to pass judgment as well? The traitor succubus is lost, for now, but I have a flock of erinyes, some cultists, my dear Invadiah, and her cambion son. My lord surely knows, wise as he is, what has occurred: who is to be punished for this failure?”

If Lorcan could have done anything he would have wept, shivered, fallen to the ground—the terror that gripped his very core

at Glasya's disdain, at her father's consideration was more than he could bear, and yet he was forced to bear it. No demotion for cambions. He was going to die.

The erinyes, Asmodeus said. *Invadiah is demoted.*

"Of course," the archduchess said lightly. If Asmodeus had thought to crush her by ordering the demotion of her most exalted erinyes, he was not satisfied, and the air burned hotter still. "For it is, after all, the parent who shapes the children and plants the seed of their success or failure. A wise decision."

Invadiah's screams drowned the sound of the scourge and the sound of the splintering bones and splattering blood. They rivaled the terrible drone of Asmodeus's presence.

An ear-splitting crescendo, and both Invadiah's screams and Asmodeus's presence ended, clearing Lorcan's vision. The god of evil was gone.

Lorcan looked to his mother. Huddled in the torn red flesh of her former body, a shivering creature with long black hair and pale, cool skin with a pair of batlike wings curled around her stiff and bloodied form, glared down at the talons of her hands, still pressed flat against the oozing floor. Invadiah, the succubus. For his mother, it might be worse than dying.

"As further punishment, Invadiah's holdings shall pass to her children. But"—Glasya snapped the scourge against the throne once more—"because the lot of you have failed me in spectacular ways, I place control over all her holdings and offspring in the hands of the only one who has shown any promise."

For a horrible moment, Lorcan did not dare look up, afraid to see which of his cruel erinyes sisters was being given such power. Or worse—Glasya pointing the scourge at *him*.

"Your highness is most kind," he heard Sairché say. She kneeled before the dais, her head lowered and a smirk tugging at her mouth. "I shall endeavor to serve you better than my predecessor."

"See that you keep your troops in line," Glasya said. "You shall be too easy to kill, Sairché."

"Of course, your highness. I would request one thing?" Sairché glanced back at him. "I do not think Lorcan has learned his lesson in

this. I should like him confined to the apartments of the third tower until his messes are sorted out."

Glasya's regard fell fully on Lorcan, and once more he made a point of keeping his eyes locked on the floor, his mind racing. Imprisoned was temporary. Imprisoned was changeable.

But if Sairché wanted him imprisoned, she wanted him out of the way—and there was only one thing Sairché wanted that she could not take with him in her path: his Kakistos heir.

"Acceptable," Glasya said.

From the edges of the courtroom, a chain shot out, wrapped around his chest, and jerked Lorcan from his stasis, the shrapnel of the spell ripping across his nerves and leaving him breathless as the devilish jailor, itself wrapped in the heavy, spiked chains, dragged Lorcan from the court of Osseia.

As he was marched along, the sensation of a hand toying with his hair played along his scalp, and Lorcan froze. The chained devil stopped a moment, as if waiting for the presence. Lorcan held his breath.

Don't think I'm not grateful, Glasya's horrible voice crooned in his ear. *Your sister may be persuasive, but you and I know your warlock kept things in check. Do be careful, little Lorcan. I may have need of you and her in the future*.

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